CHARLIE MURDER
The indie rock 'n' roller that stole our hearts

CALL OF DUTY: GHOSTS
Next-gen shooter goes to the dogs

ASSASSIN'S CREED IV
Diving deep into the seafaring stunner

XBOX

OFFICIAL X

State of Decay
Spoiler-filled chat with the zombie hit's creators

Destiny
New info on Bungie's amazing shooter

ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE

Hands-on with the RPG that'll rule Xbox One

Details on character classes, combat, and a world bigger than **Skyrim**!

My First Love
The games that inspired 40 developers

OCT 2013
ISSUE 153
Future

Microsoft

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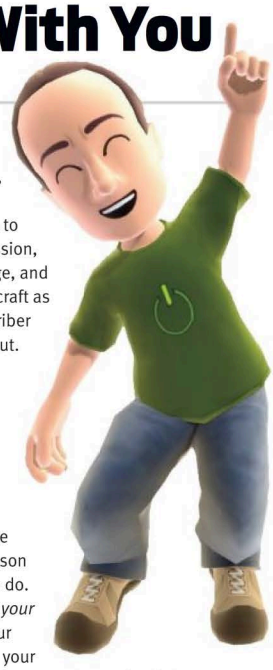

ONE OF THE WILDEST THINGS about this console cycle is how much everything's changed since it started. Eight years will do that. The 360's gone from blades to Avatars to Kinect, but many of us — its users — have evolved just as much. We're different people, different gamers...and there's no going back.

Eight years ago, I was a mostly-PC gamer who dabbled with *Halo 2* and *X-Men Legends* on my original Xbox. Then I joined the *OXM* staff in early 2006 and BAM! — my 360 became an obsession. So did Gamerscore. With each awesome new franchise (*Gears of War*! *Mass Effect*! *BioShock*!) and the groundbreaking addition of Netflix, I became more and more consumed. Sure, this road's had some big potholes (the Red Ring debacle was more like a giant sinkhole), but I grew to love this console — the best gaming system I've ever owned — like no other. That's a big part of why I'm so excited for the Xbox One: I want the fun to continue in new, next-gen form, with wonders as unimaginable as the 360's were when it first debuted.

I'll definitely miss viewing and writing about those wonders as a member of the *OXM* team. This issue is my last, and it's been incredibly great working with the rest of the staff here — a group of diehard gamers who're all deeply talented at their jobs. Whether it was Alaina's witty observations about the industry, Dave Rudden's irrepressible glee at meeting the Ultimate Warrior, or Fran 100%-ing a Coheed and Cambria song in *Rock Band* (on Expert vocals!), my staffmates past and present have both inspired me and made me smile. And I'm happy, too, knowing that I'll still be able to savor their passion, their knowledge, and their editorial craft as an *OXM* subscriber from here on out. Thanks in advance, guys.

Before I go, I'd like to add a final thanks to you, our readers — the people we write for and the reason we do what we do. We appreciate *your* devotion — your love of games, your comments on the magazine and website — more than we can say, and trading emails and otherwise interacting with some of you over the years has been a highlight of my time here. For me, it'll be new, different, and even a little scary enjoying the Xbox world from the outside now, but we're in this together, and I'm glad to have you in my corner. So let's hunker down and get ready for November's launch, because remember: as cool as the Xbox One seems now, just think of what it might deliver eight years from now. I can't wait.

— COREY COHEN

QUESTION OF THE MONTH

What game made you want to work in the gaming press?

FRANCESCA REYES, EDITOR-IN-CHIEF (@tomobiki): I've loved games since I was kid, but the three that always stick out as my tentpole "I want to do this forever" experiences seemed to all release in 1993: *LandStalker* on Genesis, *Lunar: The Silver Star* on Sega CD, and *Shining Force* on Genesis. Little sleep was had that year, I'm guessing.

Duke Nukem 3D (1996), which launched just *after* I started as a games journo! I'd always loved videogames, but because the gaming press was much smaller in the mid-'90s, I'd barely considered a career in it. Discussing *Duke* with my then-colleagues quickly reinforced that this industry was a great fit for me.

Corey Cohen
EXECUTIVE EDITOR @storytron

The early concept version of what became ***The Legend of Zelda: Wind Waker***. Seeing a teaser trailer with a realistic-looking Link in 2000 made me all but die from wanting further info. I wanted to be part of *Nintendo Power* so badly — even as a lowly intern fetching coffee — just to stop the agony of overwhelming curiosity.

Alaina Yee
MANAGING EDITOR @morphingball

I've always loved discussing videogames nearly as much as playing them, but after diving into the original ***BioShock***, I was so enamored with it that I desperately needed to know everything about the industry that created it.

Parker Wilhelm
EDITORIAL INTERN @parkerwilhelm

Reading game mags as a kid set the table, but I knew I needed games to be my career while at my post-college dead-end office job. The only hour of fulfillment I had each workday was the one I'd spent playing ***Lumines*** (PSP) during lunch; within a month, I quit — and a month later, I got a full-time editorial gig.

Dave Rudden
SENIOR EDITOR @daverudden

Got a QOTM for us? Email *letters@officialxboxmagazine.com*!

XBOX OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

ISSUE 153 · OCTOBER 2013

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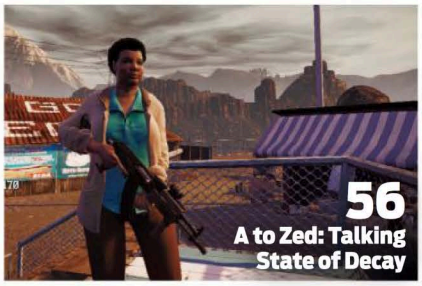
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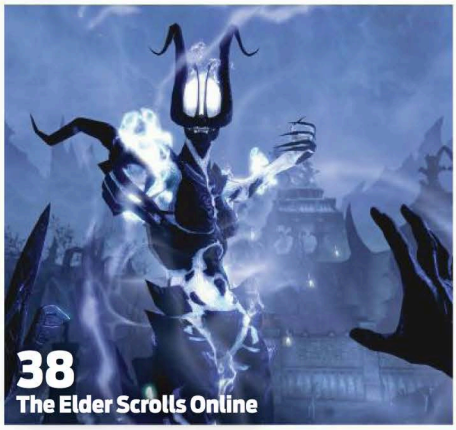
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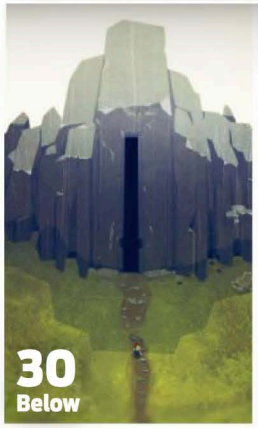
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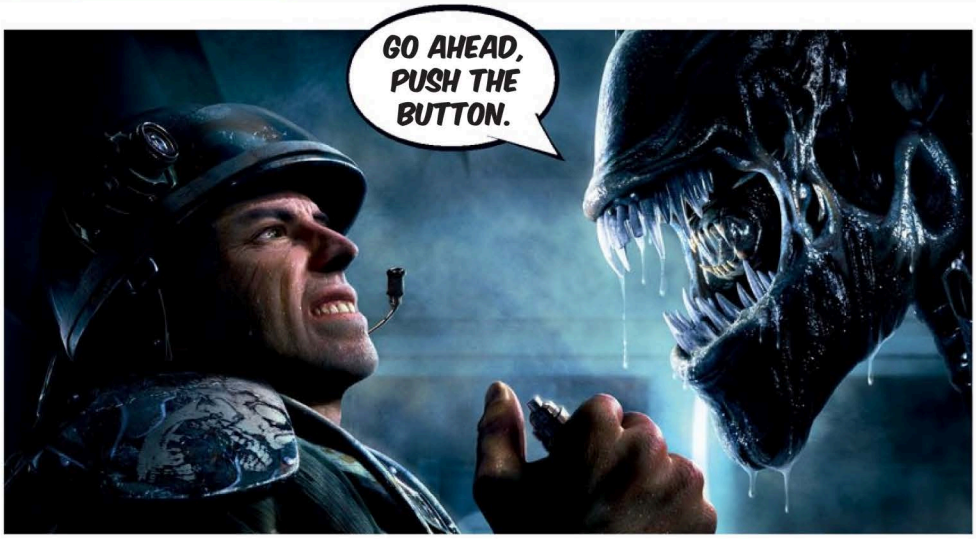

Waning Trust

ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES was garbage, but before its release Gearbox head Randy Pitchford kept saying how cool it'd be, just as he did with *Duke Nukem Forever*. Because of lies like these, I'm losing faith in the industry. Is screwing customers to make money the new norm? Pre-ordering games is getting to be very risky. If your game blows, why not put it back in development for a bit? I know that costs money, but at least your sales numbers will do better than if you released a half-assed product. **– CHRIS**

WE SAY *Definitely understand your displeasure with* ACM, *Chris — we'd been looking forward to it for years. We don't blame Gearbox for promoting the game: it's their job to boost excitement for their product. We do, however, take issue with Sega and Gearbox reportedly using inaccurate footage to make the game look better than it turned out to be — there's no defending false advertising, and* ACM*'s PR-provided screenshots were among the most deceptive we've seen, making its graphics look vastly better than they actually were.* ¶ *As for why Sega didn't put the game back into development: it's indeed possible that if the publisher had given Gearbox more time and money — even with* ACM*'s already-extensive dev cycle — the final game would've been more polished and dealt less damage to each company's reputation. But a more solid game wouldn't necessarily have yielded higher sales numbers; even great games sell terribly sometimes. We're guessing Sega made some sort of cost/benefit analysis and decided it was best to just cut their losses and release the game as-is...to everyone's disappointment.*

Have some questions or comments to share? **CONTACT US!**

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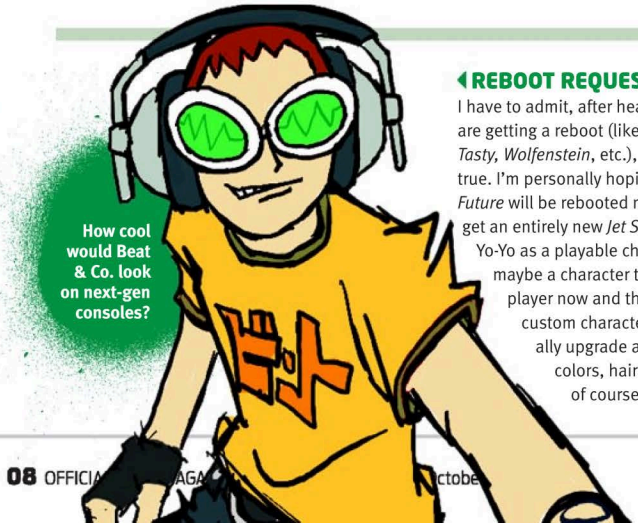

How cool would Beat & Co. look on next-gen consoles?

REBOOT REQUEST

I have to admit, after hearing that some games are getting a reboot (like *Oddworld: New 'n' Tasty*, *Wolfenstein*, etc.), it's like a dream come true. I'm personally hoping that *Jet Set Radio Future* will be rebooted next, or that we'll even get an entirely new *Jet Set Radio*. I'd love to see Yo-Yo as a playable character once again, or maybe a character that gives advice to the player now and then. And naturally, a custom character that you can continually upgrade and customize (clothing, colors, hairstyles, and so on). And of course, skates! **– JUSTIN**

FRANCESCA, FELLOW *JET SET* FAN, RESPONDS: *I'm so onboard with this idea, Justin, you don't even know! I've been a huge fan of the series since its Dreamcast debut and adored (and reviewed in* OXM*) the original Xbox sequel. The idea of reviving the entire universe and series for a new generation of gamers would make me ridiculously happy — but only in the right hands. If you bone up on now-defunct developer Smilebit's inspiration for the first game, it might be like catching lightning in a bottle to reproduce the energy and vibe that Sega's in-house studio put into creating both games. But, I've been surprised before by new teams taking over older*

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franchises (Playground's Forza Horizon, *Ninja Theory's* DmC: Devil May Cry, *343's* Halo 4, *etc.), so I'd be entirely open to the idea of a reboot if only to play as my favorite* Jet Set *character, Cube, again.*

WE FUMBLED

I'm not writing to complain that you gave a game a lower score than you should've, or even to tell you to take a different approach to reviews than to just give us a play-by-play walkthrough that reveals everything about the game as a result. No, I'm here for much more important matters: you claimed that Adrian Peterson is with the Baltimore Ravens. That's an offense I'll never forgive. – **ERIN**

WE SAY *We got a lot of letters from outraged Vikings fans (we're not quite sure if you're one of them, Erin, or if you're an extremely irritated Ravens fan) that quickly pointed out our gaffe in our August 2013 issue. We apologize for missing that error; to ensure it won't happen again, we've threatened to make our Inbox writer listen to the entirety of Deion "Prime Time" Sanders' musical efforts on infinite repeat.*

PORT PROBABILTY

I've owned an Xbox 360 for several years now, but recently I've started to think I chose the wrong system, solely based on the fact that perhaps the best game of this console generation, *The Last of Us*, is exclusive to PS3. Do you think Naughty Dog would port *The Last of Us* to Xbox if they could make enough money from it? – **SCOTT**

WE SAY *We rarely say "never," Scott, but we do think it's pretty much a dead-in-the-water idea. While it's not a hard and fast rule that first-party-published exclusives don't go on to be released on other platforms, the fact that Naughty Dog is a Sony-owned studio is what really makes us say that the chances of the game traveling to current rival hardware are slim to none, much like you'll probably never see a* Halo *game on a Sony console.*

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Could you guys currently on staff share a little more about yourselves? I've been reading Fran's articles since she was a review-crew member at *Ultra Gameplayers*, and all I really know about her is that she likes JRPGs. If I'm going to give weight to someone's opinion on a game, I'd like to know more about them than just what their Avatar looks like. – **J.C.**

WE SAY *We're hurt, J.C. Have you not been paying attention to all the bottom fillers and other random reveals in the magazine of our deepest, most personal moments? By now, you should know that the TSA has an fondness for patting down Dave R.; Corey reigns supreme as spoiler king; Alaina has a cat that's a terror-beast; Dave C. is a PS3 convert; and Fran delights everyone with surprise desserts. Seriously speaking, though, you can hit up our website to see the body of each person's work, and hey — we're all on Twitter, so feel free to follow our individual accounts!*

TV TALK

What do you think will be the best TV type for the Xbox One? Will 120Hz sets be enough? What sort of input lag should I be on the look out for, too, when it comes to the TV handling next-gen graphics well? – **TOM**

ALAINA, RESIDENT TECH-LOVER, SAYS: *My personal opinion is that you're going to be happiest picking a TV that looks good to* your *eyes. Sure, some people will go off pure numbers, and buy a 240Hz LED or LCD TV because they think it's superior to 60Hz and 120Hz. But is it worth chasing those specs? I think that depends — I notice a difference between 60Hz and 120Hz, but some people don't. (And some people claim they can spot an improvement between 120Hz and 240Hz, but I barely do.) Generally, I think if you're going to be worried about refresh rates, you may as well go with a plasma and circumvent the whole motion-blur issue all together, due to the difference in technology between plasmas and LED/LCD TVs; you also could go with an OLED TV instead, but they're still quite pricey.*

However, if you're the kind of person who focuses very closely on the refresh-rate specs on TVs, that's going to be somewhat at cross-purposes with any concerns about input lag. While input lag will vary between TVs (no matter if they're plasma, LCD, LED, or OLED), so too will the effects of any "game mode" — in order to minimize input lag, anything from refresh rates to color processing might get downgraded to help speed things up, which could result in ugliness or motion blur that could affect your gameplay experience as much as input lag. So, if you're considering a new TV, I'd recommend buying from somewhere that has a generous return policy, in case you end up not finding it adequate for your next-gen experience.

Unfortunately, Xbox owners will likely never see Naughty Dog's *The Last of Us* on a Microsoft console.

WHOOPS: Polk Audio's 4 Shot headset (featured as part of our Sept '13 issue's Xbox One hardware mentions) *will* actually be wireless. Keep an eye out for a review in coming months!

Is it the messaging for Xbox One that turned some gamers off?

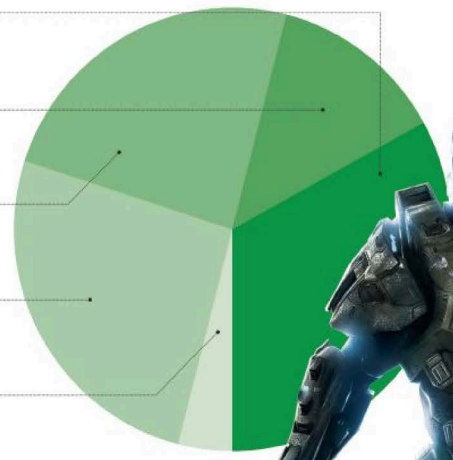
WHAT THE...

After E3 and its fallout, I've come to the conclusion that Microsoft's entertainment division presently has *the worst marketing team ever*. After the initial Xbox One announcement, my friends and I conducted extensive research into the new console and its features; we were convinced that we must have missed something, since the DRM requirements seemed so draconian without offering any benefits. It wasn't until one of us found an online article that we found the other half of the equation. Our collective reaction? "*Digital sharing with friends and family?! Have I died and gone to heaven?*" That quickly turned to disappointment with the news that Microsoft was abandoning the model altogether.

In light of the new developments, I have just one question: how did Microsoft let E3 go by without mentioning this feature? Why did I have to dig to find out about the upside to all of this? Can you get Microsoft to fire this marketing team (out of a cannon into the sun)? Is there any chance Microsoft will return to the DRM model in the future? – **JON**

WE SAY ***While we don't know why Microsoft adopted the approach it did in promoting the Xbox One and its new features during its announcement and at E3, we can say that at press time, the company certainly seems to be rethinking their strategy. When addressing the clamor from fans disappointed about the removal of the digital-sharing feature, Xbox One chief product officer Marc Whitten stated in an IGN interview that "[i]f it's something that people are really excited about and want, we're going to make sure that we find the right way to bring it back...[T]aking Family Sharing out of the launch window was not about 'we're going to take our toys and go home.'" So, it does seem like there's hope...for now.***

CHART ATTACK Filling our minds and mailboxes



33% Undo the changes, Microsoft! Bring back digital sharing!

13% Zynga can have Don Mattrick.

24% This round of the console wars is going to be epic!

26% This round of the console wars has already been decided!

4% Do you have more details on what that new *Halo* game will be?!

LIVESPACE

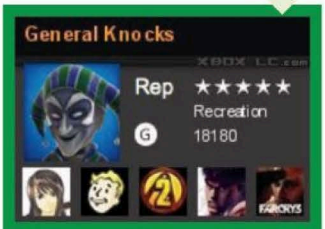
Xbox Live is full of nice people looking for a good game — and people like themselves. That's where LiveSpace comes in. Each month, we'll highlight one of our readers hunting for other awesome gamers to play with. If you'd like to be featured, send an email to letters@officialxboxmagazine.com with the subject line "LiveSpace," and include the following information:

GAMERTAG Yours, of course

ACHIEVEMENTS Which Achievements do you take the most pride in having earned, and why?

WANTS TO PLAY Which games do you currently own that you'd like to play with other people on Xbox Live?

HI, MY NAME IS Your first name, where you're from, and your hobbies — gaming-related and otherwise. Basically, tell us more about the gamer behind the tag. Don't be shy!



General Knocks

ACHIEVEMENTS: "Vincible" from *Borderlands* (Kill Crawmerax the Invincible) and "Thresher Thrashed" from *Borderlands 2* (Defeated Terramorphous the Invincible) — these are two of the hardest achievements I've ever tried for!

WANTS TO PLAY: *Borderlands 2, Super Street Fighter 4 Arcade Edition, Far Cry 3, Halo 4*

HI, MY NAME IS: Jesse, from Abbotsford, BC, Canada. I'm a cook and have been for 10 years. I love it; it has opened up my world to travel and culture that I never would have expected. I've been a gamer for about 20 years, and my current favorite videogame series is *Borderlands* — I have a level 69 berserker & siren in *Borderlands*, and a level 51 gunzerker and siren in *Borderlands 2*. I'm looking to game with fellow fans of the series!

BAD COMBO

GOOD

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Assassin's Creed IV:

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PLATFORMS Xbox 360, Xbox One **PUB** Ubisoft **DEV** Ubisoft (multiple studios) **MP** YES **RELEASES** Oct 29 **FOR FANS OF** *Moby Dick*, the ocean, being eaten by sharks

UPDATE

HOW DOES A FRANCHISE that's already seen five releases in the span of five years serve up the series' mix of open-world, freewheeling murder and *expand* upon it? By taking what were discrete, separate pieces of gameplay in *Assassin's Creed III* and making them even *bigger*.

For most of the series, we've crawled through bushes, skulked in the shadows, and even plummeted from the sky — but it was only just last fall that we shed our land legs to head out to sea. Those tastes of that watery frontier were delivered in measured, fixed portions, though; something that Ubisoft Singapore, the team behind *ACIII*'s well-publicized naval missions, has completely overhauled for this year's *Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*.

And given the scope of just what they're aiming for — in conjunction with their juggernaut sister studio (and the creators of the franchise), Ubisoft Montreal — those with a craving to explore exotic locations with an ever-present threat of danger won't be disappointed. Because Ubisoft Singapore's out to accomplish what they weren't able to in *ACIII*: making the seas a true open-world experience. And that applies as much to above the waves as below them...

THE HEART OF THE OCEAN

Standing in the middle of a cozy and somewhat chaotic maze of desks, we're huddled close to a screen as senior game designer Michael Hampden gives us our first long look at just what it'll be like to plume the Caribbean's depths. As new hero Edward Kenway (grandfather of *ACIII*'s Connor Kenway) emerges from a diving bell, the ocean setting appears peaceful. Plants sway with the current, while shipwreck debris hints at treasure to be found. Despite the completely unrelated setting, the atmosphere rivals that of being within Italy's largest structures: eerily quiet, flush with mystery, ripe with possibility... and full of potential danger.

Within seconds of Edward kicking away from the diving bell, a detection meter begins to show red, revealing both a new use of the long-existing warning system and just one of the fresh threats that come with this underwater space: a shark's nearby, and since we're defenseless, it's on us to scramble and find a safe spot. There's no hope of coming back to properly deal with Mr. Jaws, either — as repeated to us multiple times over the course of our day-long look at the game, Edward's only a predator in the world above. Down here, among coral and sea life, he's the prey.

Our demoer opts to slip into one of several

STEALTH WORKERS: Though it's not widely advertised, Ubisoft Singapore has actually been contributing to the *Assassin's Creed* series since 2009's *ACII*. Remember those tomb missions? They created all of those.

Black Flag

barrels hovering within the shipwreck debris; these versatile objects not only keep you from being fish food (though we do wonder why a shark wouldn't note the pair of legs dangling out the bottom end and give them a nip), but also serve as refill spots for air. You won't just have to contend with the finned hazards down here — you'll also have to carefully monitor your oxygen while poking around for loot.

It's a juggling act that mixes risk with reward: though how fast your oxygen depletes is still being finalized, we found ourselves at a similar mental crossroads as we did when completing one of *Assassin's Creed II*'s stealth missions: Do we stop for air now? Or do we push further into the hull of the sunken ship? When a shark's nearby, is it better to hide among the plants, or should we chance wiggling up into an unused barrel for oxygen and shelter? From what we

ACIV: Black Flag's ship combat will be faster, action-packed, and more tactical.

ALL AROUND THE WORLD: Other Ubisoft locations you may not be aware of: Ubisoft Abu Dhabi (United Arab Emirates); Ubisoft Sofia (Bulgaria); Ubisoft Pune (India); Ubisoft Casablanca (Morocco)

TOP Sometimes you'll be required to assassinate a fort's commander to finish conquering it. **LEFT** Climbed all the way up a ship's mast, and want a quick way down? Just take a leap of faith right into the water. **RIGHT** Once you take over this ship, you can snag its cargo and/or add it to your fleet.

could see, there's ample time to make these decisions without drowning — as lead game designer Sebastien Berton explains, the team "wants to give a lot of freedom to players" — but with that hovering constraint, it adds in a tactical twist.

MASTER OF THE SEAS

The surface of the ocean also holds its share of that risk-reward tension. Ship combat has been overhauled — in *ACIII*, you could scoot through naval battles with the same ship as you started with. No longer, says Berton; now you'll need to carefully weigh your ship's offensive and defensive capabilities, and upgrade them as necessary before brashly starting a fight with a bigger ship.

And some of those boats will dwarf your *Jackdaw*: in *Black Flag*, you'll have to contend with more types of vessels in battle, and their different classifications will actually matter. How you deal with, say, a smaller gunship will differ from holding your own against a hulking Man O' War, in terms of the weaponry, ammunition, and basic tactics used. (In total, you'll have five kinds of ships to contend with; the brig, schooner, and frigate classes fill out the rest of the scale between small and large.) The team also notes that dynamic weather patterns also play a role in taking on enemy ships; for example, if you've perhaps bitten off more than you can chew in a given scenario, an oncoming storm may lend you some sorely needed aid.

You can also obtain additional help for yourself in the form of converted forts. Think of it as the naval version of removing Templar influence from specific strongholds in *AC Brotherhood* through *ACIII*, but with a more tangible payoff: instead of being able to just freely pass through the territory, you'll also get the benefit of these installations' cannon fire if you can lure an enemy ship into their range.

Undertaking these conversions isn't without a bit of work, however; in our rubble-filled demonstration, the *Jackdaw* had to take down six separate points of defenses before Edward could leap over to the remains of the fort and finish out the last of the requirements to conquer it. (In this case, assassinating its commander.) It's a task that appears to be less cumbersome than taking

FURLED MULTIPLAYER SAILS: When asked, Ubisoft Singapore said that despite naval combat being an integrated part of the single-player experience, we won't see any boat-related hijinks in multiplayer.

LEFT This harpooning concept art contains about 70% more clothing than actual gameplay. **BELOW** More exciting than swordplay is the fact that you'll get more pistols to overcome reload times — and can now target specific body parts.

out a fort in *ACIII* — thanks to combat being refined further, where you aim your reticle matters, allowing you to have a better sense of when you land a hit and when you don't.

AQUATIC HUNTING GROUNDS

But perhaps the most entertaining aspect of *Black Flag*'s deeper set of sea-based adventures is being able to harpoon (aka hunt) various types of whales and sharks. In a particularly amusing bit of gameplay, we watch as a shirtless Edward stands perched at the bow of a small rowboat, his blond hair gleaming in the light. For a moment, we can almost mistake the scene for a romance-novel cover...until he sinks a harpoon right smack into the hide of a great white shark swimming nearby.

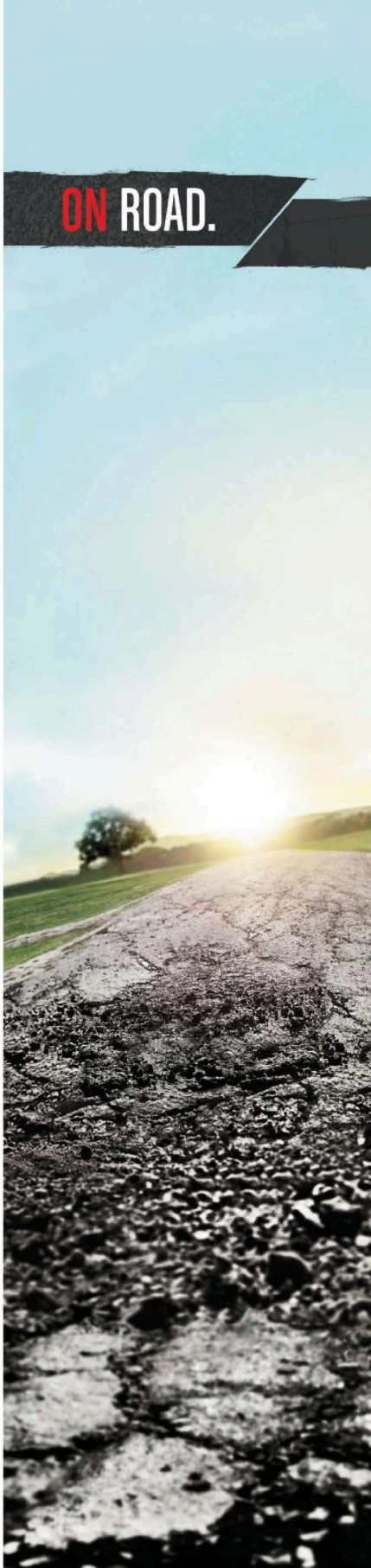
Blood spurts into the water as the shark takes off; the rowboat, attached to the harpoon by a rope, glides behind the agitated creature as Edward lobs additional harpoons at it. At one point, the irate creature swims back toward the boat, and leaps out of the water with its open, toothy maw aimed straight for our hero; our demoer takes the opportunity to jab the beast once more, causing the waves to turn red as the shark plunges back into the ocean. Froth churns up, and water droplets hit the screen, but after a few more thrown harpoons (which are not an unlimited resource, so you'll need to hone your aim), the scene switches over to a cinematic showing the dead great white being hoisted up onto the *Jackdaw* amid cheers from your crew. The spoils of your hunts tie into *ACIV: Black Flag*'s crafting system, which the team claims is based on *Far Cry 3*'s much-lauded approach — not *ACIII*'s.

Despite a day spent with Edward and Ubisoft Singapore, we were still left with one question: how does making the Caribbean into one big water park for the Assassins and Templars figure into the series' never-ending strife between the two factions? Ubisoft isn't saying much on plot beyond what's already been revealed, but we're hoping that whatever the story is behind Edward's induction into the Assassins, it's a good one. Because as wonderfully novel as it'll be to loot sunken ruins, blow up coastal forts, and enrage PETA, we still need a reason why we're doing it all in the first place. **– ALAINA YEE**

WOODEN MINIONS

Once you capture ships — whether for plunder or power — you'll be able to use them to gather additional resources for you if you add them to your fleet. Think of it as *ACIV*'s version of leveling up assassins the way you could in *Brotherhood* and *Revelations*: you can farm out some busywork to NPCs while you occupy yourself with important affairs, like looting ruins on the ocean floor or jabbing sharks with pointy sticks.

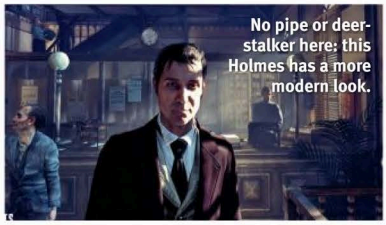
ON ROAD.



From that quick glance, Holmes probably knows more about those guys than their best friends do.

We sure don't miss the proprietary engine that powered 2012's *Testament*.

Train tracks + blood? Not good.



No pipe or deerstalker here: this Holmes has a more modern look.

Sherlock Holmes: Crimes & Punishments

Return of the super-sleuth

PLATFORM Xbox 360 **PUB** Focus Home Interactive **DEV** Frogwares **MULTIPLAYER** No **RELEASES** Q1 2014 **FOR FANS OF** Mysteries, crime-solving, psychological mastery

FIRST LOOK

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE'S timeless detective may be all over TV these days (*Elementary*, the BBC's *Sherlock*), but his biggest success story could be yet to come. "*Crimes & Punishments* marks the most important stage in the *Sherlock Holmes* series," its creators have claimed — and based on a recent demo of Frogwares' ninth entry* in its long-running franchise, we're cautiously optimistic.

Crimes' upgrade to Unreal Engine 3 graphics is an immediate improvement: its characters' look much better than the oddly distorted faces that pock-marked last year's *The Testament of Sherlock Holmes*, as do the bustling environments of late-1800s London. We appreciated these sharper visuals most when our hero's attention honed in on microscopic details — the scarred hands of interrogation suspect John Hopley Neligan, for example, or the dust pattern on a shelf indicating it once held a small chest.

In the case our demo focused on — one based on the classic Doyle story "The Adventure of Black Peter" — Holmes' unrivaled powers of observation are what make the police request his help in the first place. Arriving at the crime scene, you see that former sea captain Peter Carey has been pinned to a wall by a whaling harpoon. Beneath the dead man you find a knife (which you quickly determine was Carey's, not the murderer's); as you wander around the room, you also discover a blood-soaked notebook with the initials JHN, a chest you can pick open, and other clues.

You'll do more than search crime scenes and interrogate suspects, of course. Back at Scotland Yard, you can also autopsy victims, review case reports, and examine suspects' belongings before you interview them. *Testament*'s deduction board — the place where you can connect clues and interpret them — will return, although it'll look a bit different now, we're told. What really interests us, though, is the results of what you'll do here. Each of *Crimes*' cases will have three to five conclusions based on how you link the various evidence, and the game will also offer moral choices as to whether you save or damn various suspects, says Frogwares. Didn't like how Doyle's "Black Peter" ended? Interpret the evidence differently and someone else might be found guilty...

Not every case will be based on existing Holmes fiction, but all eight cases will have a connection learned at the end of this 15-hour game. Well, one of its "6 to 10" different endings, that is. Just *thinking* about all those possibilities is making our brains expand...

— COREY COHEN

***HISTORY:** *Crimes & Punishments* is Frogwares' ninth *Holmes* game. Two of those earlier ones released on Xbox 360: *Sherlock Holmes versus Jack the Ripper* and *The Testament of Sherlock Holmes*.

Adventure Time: Explore the Dungeon Because I Don't Know!

It really doesn't matter that you don't

PLATFORMS Xbox 360 **PUB** D3Publisher **DEV** WayForward **MULTIPLAYER** Yes **RELEASES** Fall 2013
FOR FANS OF Retro games, sharing a couch with friends, random but grand adventures

***ADVENTURE TIME* FANS**, rejoice: the second game based on the popular Cartoon Network series is headed to Xbox — and so far, it's turning out to be a fantastic homage to 8-bit, top-down action-adventure games from days gone by.

The story is as minimalist as you would expect from a NES–era–inspired game: the more fearsome threats to the Candy Kingdom, who've been imprisoned in a special dungeon beneath the realm, have begun to escape confinement — and so series heroes Finn and Jake investigate the cause of the trouble.

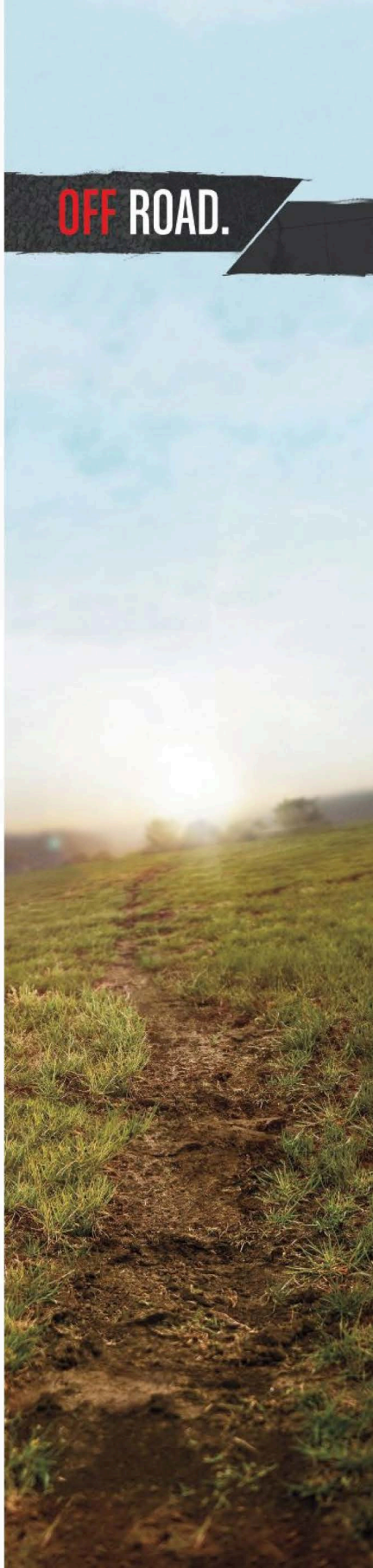
Adventure Time: Because I Don't Know! wears its retro-influences on its sleeve; beyond the chiptune soundtrack and character sprites, you'll encounter old-school staples like a power-up gauge ("Imagination"), charged attacks ("Focus"), and a health meter ("Thumps"). You can upgrade these stats every five levels, with WayForward noting there'll be 100 levels to explore — but on top of that, before you descend into the dungeon, you'll also have the option to equip 1–3 stat-modifying tokens, which boost anything from health to speed for as long as they're selected.

Our short taste of gameplay had a surprisingly nuanced feel to it — since each character has unique abilities (Marceline, for example, can absorb red projectiles to charge up her Imagination meter), it appears you'll be able to take a tactical approach to the game if you so choose. With some amusing bosses to vanquish — we faced down the Demon Cat in a quick skirmish — we're definitely excited by this pixelated videogame extension of the cartoon series, though we are wondering if *Because I Don't Know!* will provide enough content to justify its retail release. (This is even despite WayForward's assurances it won't be a full $60.) For now, however, things are looking pretty mathematical. – **ALAINA YEE**

RIGHT For now, only vampiress Marceline and Candy-Kingdom citizen Cinnamon Bun have been confirmed as additional playable characters. **BELOW** You can wander with up to three friends in same-screen, local-only co-op. Dibs on the health drops!

WayForward hinted that you'll find original content (like fresh faces being used as bosses) in *Because I Don't Know!*.

KILLING US WITH CUTE: To our delight, our demo included a showing of a kitten gun, which literally shot mewling balls of fluff at enemies. Here's to hoping we see other amusingly inventive weaponry.



Trials Fusion

This isn't flying – it's "falling with style"

PLATFORM Xbox One, XBLA **PUB** Ubisoft **DEV** RedLynx **MULTIPLAYER** TBD **RELEASES** 2014 **FOR FANS OF** Do-overs, vehicle platformers, racing against time

FAR LEFT If you've ever played a *Trials* game before, all those angles on skyscrapers in this concept piece should give you a small thrill. LEFT This concept art gives you an idea of what direction *Fusion*'s Tron-style art is headed in. You'll still be on a ground-based moto-cross bike, though. No flying machines here.

FIRST LOOK

UBISOFT'S CURRENT GAMES lineup provides us with several rather glum glimpses into the future — first with techno-thriller *Watch Dogs*, and then there'll be a world of post-apocalyptic panic in *Tom Clancy's The Division*. *Trials Fusion*, however, has a different kind of outlook entirely. Here, the future's bright, it's dizzyingly death-defying, and it promises a whole lot of bike- and physics-based fun.

Fusion is set amidst the immaculately polished metal of an impossibly clean futuristic city, and the level we've seen depicts a vertigo-inducing track set high above the clouds, where only the odd skyscraper pokes through. Developer RedLynx promises that there will also be different environments on offer, with tracks featuring the usual assortment of forests, snow, and sand. Its futuristic theme will stretch to rider gear and bikes too — the idea being, RedLynx says, that whenever you see a *Fusion* screenshot you'll instantly be able to distinguish it from its previous XBLA hits, *Trials Evolution* and *Trials HD*.

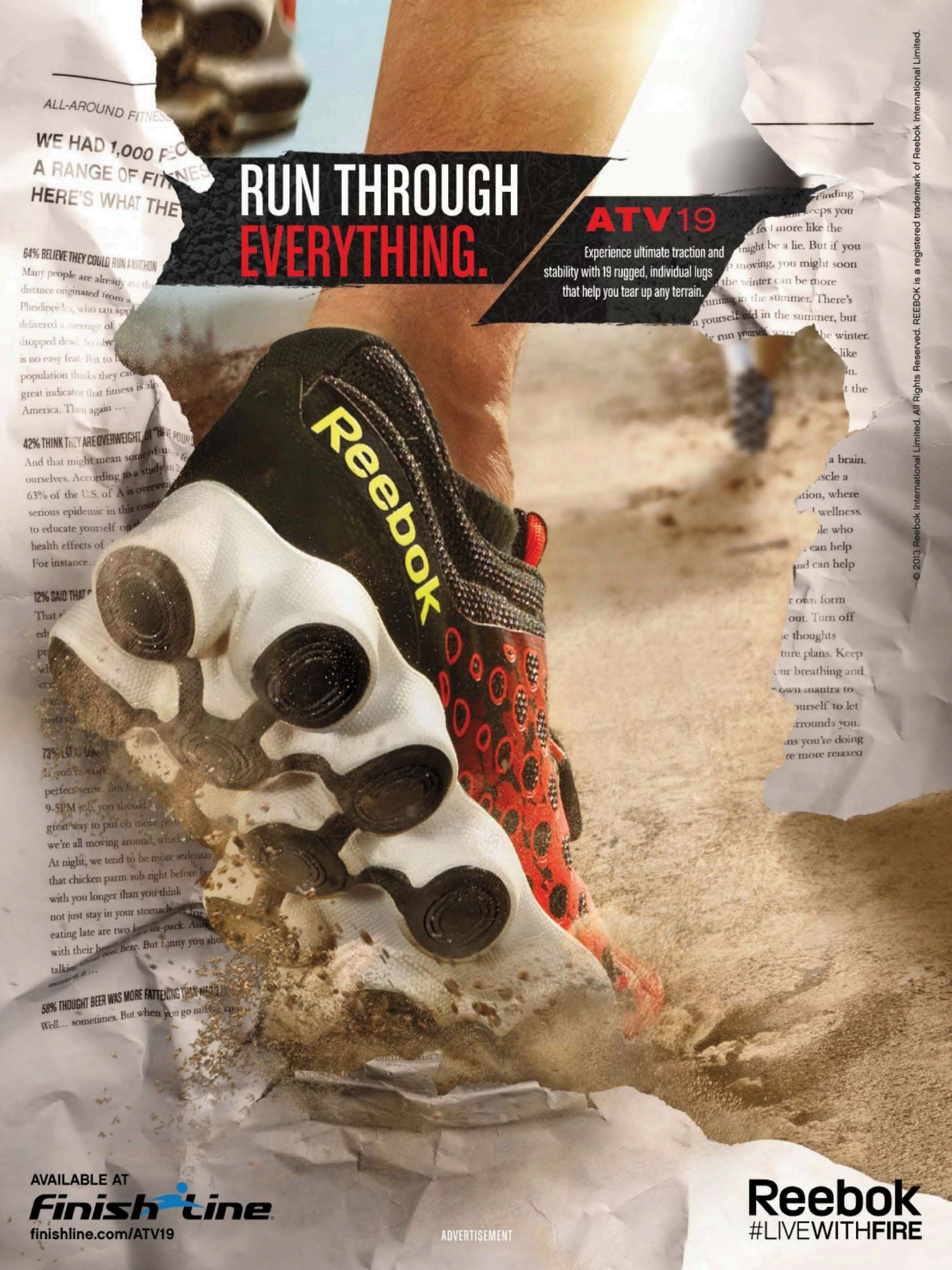
A new trick-based mode is one of *Fusion*'s major new additions, but creative director Antti Ilvessuo insists that the developer doesn't plan to spoil the tried-and-tested core gameplay of the *Trials* series, and so the physics-based Trick mode will remain an entirely separate entity from the core speed- and balance-focused gameplay mode that *Trials* fans know and love. RedLynx hasn't spilled the beans on exactly how tricks are done just yet, but has revealed that the total distance a bike can fall has been increased even further — to a maximum near-one-mile drop.

Trials Fusion will also feature a new Gigatrack-style course, said to be five times longer than the Gigatrack in *Evolution*. The developer also plans to embrace all of the sharing features that the next-gen platform will offer, from video recording and distributing to leaderboard functionality.

Those playing *Fusion* also get the chance to interact with the developer's mobile-only title, *Trials Frontier*, offering cross-platform players bonus features like the ability to check online leaderboards for both titles simultaneously. But current-gen owners needn't fear — the game is set to release on both Xbox 360 and Xbox One, so no one is left out in the chilly air...while plummeting to their death for the zillionth time. Do over!

–AOIFE WILSON

HUGE SUCCESS: The first *Trials* game to hit XBLA — *Trials HD* in 2009's Summer of Arcade promotion — was a massive success, with over a million paid downloads by the following September in 2010.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This stealth takedown of a passing enemy may seem somewhat scripted, but it's still white-knuckle tense while it's happening.

Call of Duty: Ghosts

It's got the style, but does it have the substance?

PLATFORMS Xbox 360, Xbox One **PUB** Activision **DEV** Infinity Ward **MULTIPLAYER** Yes **RELEASES** November 5 **FOR FANS OF** Man's best friend, epic action set-pieces

UPDATE

A BREAK FROM the trials and tribulations of Soap MacTavish and his woolly cohorts in the *Modern Warfare* series, *Call of Duty: Ghosts* aims for a fresh start in an entirely new reality. America's been rendered a bust by a wide-scale disaster of some sort (developer Infinity Ward are still playing coy about exactly what kind of "cataclysmic event" has happened), and it's the Ghosts — a ragtag group of suspiciously well-equipped military types — who're banding together against the enemy.

During the game's announcement in May, Activision showed off a gameplay demo that covered terrain not explored in past *Call of Duty* games: underwater combat. As stunning as that was, we got a chance to see two new areas that felt more akin to what the series' is better known for — blockbuster thrills and plenty of firefights. But with more dogs and rappelling.

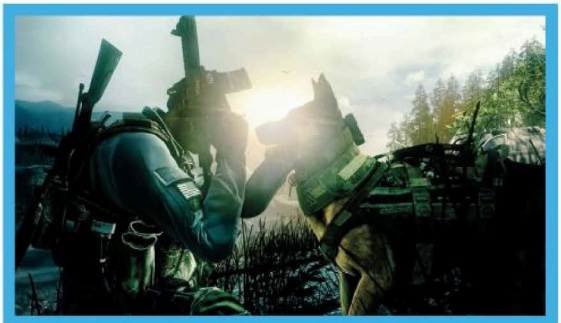
No Man's Land takes place ten miles north of San Diego, and it's the kind of rubble-strewn set-piece scenery we've long grown accustomed to — with a few caveats. Whatever disaster has struck here, it's bent and broken the landscape beyond all recognition. The ground is cracked and scarred, with massive fault lines threatening to swallow entire buildings. The focus of this demo isn't the devastation, however, but the third addition to your squad, Riley — the Ghosts' much-touted canine companion.

Much has been made of the inclusion of a service dog since it was announced at the Xbox One reveal, and though a large portion of the

The underwater sequences were breathtaking and where the next-gen polish really shows.

WRITE STUFF: The tale of brothers joining up with the ultra-elite Ghosts is being written by screenwriter and director Stephen Gaghan — the writer behind the film *Traffic*, and writer-director behind *Syriana*.

ABOVE: Rule #1 of *Call of Duty: Ghosts* Club of Super Rappelling: Don't look down! **RIGHT:** The dynamic destruction in multiplayer maps (shown in this concept piece) rivals that of fellow military shooter *Battlefield 4*.



(Furry) Fun Fact

Apparently Riley started life as a rote A.I. companion — the fluffball was only built out to be the full-fledged canine partner we now know from gameplay trailers after military consultants told Infinity Ward about the canine technology on offer from their troops.

This piece of concept art shows off a bit of what Infinity Ward is aiming for in multiplayer states, with real-time destruction.

community response has been cynical, No Man's Land attempts to showcase Riley's presence as a natural and vital component to gameplay: part recon tool, part distraction, and part stealth takedown option. Thanks to a vest-mounted camera, vibrating collar, and earpiece, you're able to send Riley to scope out environments while issuing commands from a distance. He can bark to lure enemies out from behind cover, where you can mark them for a swift sniper shot; you can also command the dog to sneak around them for a gruesome instant takedown, where he brutally — and silently — severs the jugular.

At one point during the demo, our A.I. human companion instructs Riley to jump through a window, causing the enemies inside to panic and flee through a nearby door, and thus creating a slow-motion breach move in reverse. It's worth pointing out that at this early stage, Riley's involvement seems heavily scripted. He plays very much like the spider bots and robo-drones of previous *CoD* games.

Our final mission is Federation Day, a stealthier affair set in a dazzling late-night Caracas. Fireworks pop in the distance, and the city lights on the skyline suggest a world beyond the mission at hand. Less appealing is the way Infinity Ward leads the player by the nose through the level. There are still a few tense moments as your squad rappels down a skyscraper to take down guards as their comrades look the other way. The suspense is kept up inside the building as the player hacks servers to plant a computer virus, sets explosive charges, and then escapes into the night by abseiling down the skyscraper — while it collapses spectacularly around them. This is "textbook *CoD*," and while it's understandable that Infinity Ward is sticking to the formula, it also makes it difficult to get excited.

Aside from the admittedly dazzling visual upgrade and Riley's starring role, there isn't much we've seen to set *Ghosts* apart. There are changes, but they're small: your character can now vault over smaller ledges and obstacles, eliminating those awkward jump animations. You can also slide into cover and out of fire, in a move similar to *Black Ops*' Dolphin Dive, and lean around corners to get a better feel for your surrounding environment. A new diving cover move will surely be a boon in multiplayer sessions. These have been beefed up a little, too, and now include random dynamic events such as tornadoes and earthquakes. Opportunistic soldiers can also trigger environmental disasters to ensnare competitors, like shooting a latch to cause an avalanche of heavy logs to crush the competition.

It's the multiplayer, then, that should prove to be the game's big draw, and by the time you read this, Activision will most likely have unveiled its plans for it. And the details can't come soon enough — while *Ghosts*' classic single-player package of over-the-top bombast still impresses, it's going to have to do more to guarantee sales. **– AOIFE WILSON & JON HICKS**

DOG'S EYE: Some of our favorite videogame dogs run the gamut from the *Fallout* series' Dogmeat (Xbox gamers will remember him from *Fallout 3*) to *Ghost Trick*'s yippy Pomeranian, Missile, on the Nintendo DS.

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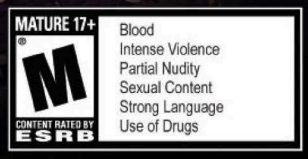


We know what you're thinking — time to make like Frank West and head-hop across that mass of undead shufflers!

Dying Light

Survival of the fittest...and fastest

PLATFORMS Xbox One **PUB** Warner Bros. Interactive **DEV** Techland **MULTIPLAYER** Yes **RELEASES** 2014 **FOR FANS OF** Running, jumping, climbing, slaughtering zombies

HANDS-ON

AT FIRST GLANCE, *Dying Light* doesn't seem all that different from developer Techland's *Dead Island* games. Both arm players with brain-bashing melee weapons, drop them in open worlds, and put them in front of hordes of undead. Of course, looks are only (sickly) skin deep and following some hands-on time with the title, it seems *Dying Light*'s got some fresh tricks festering beneath its rotting flesh.

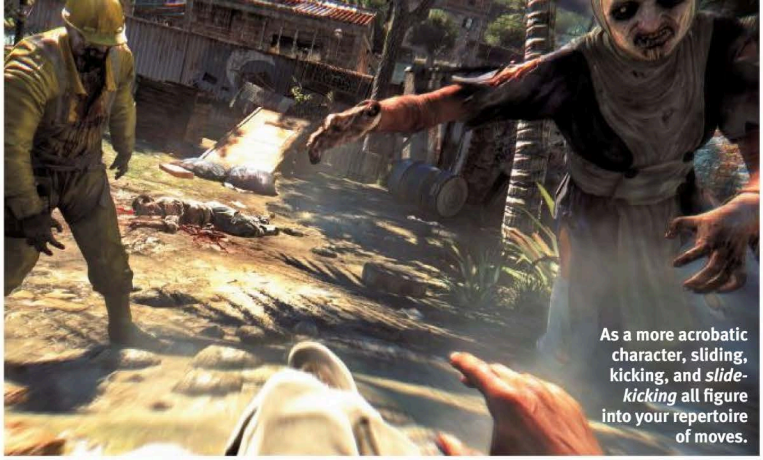
For starters, it places as much emphasis on hightailing it from the decomposing masses as it does freeing them of their infected innards. We spent a good portion of our demo mantling objects (such as dumpsters and crates), shimmying up telephone poles, scampering over rooftops, ascending highway overpasses, trampling over abandoned train cars, and generally using the open-world like our own personal parkour playground. With so much city-scaling potential, it seems *Dying Light* encourages vertical evasion over head-on violence.

Most of the acrobatics are triggered via the RB button, allowing running, jumping, and climbing to be executed in ways that feel more freeing than frustrating. Players can even evade some encounters by vaulting off the foreheads of clueless meatbags, without skipping a beat, no less. But as satisfying as it is to get in the groove, clipping through the game's urban obstacle course at a seat-of-the-pants sprint, players still have to stop and smell the decaying corpses.

This is a zombie game, after all, so combat also plays a significant role in keeping your nimble avatar from becoming a pavement stain. Like *Dead Island*, Techland's latest features a weapon crafting system that encourages you to slay with style. Aside from a machete coursing with electricity, though, we didn't get to see these brain-spilling mash-ups in action. We did, however, handle some weighty melee weapons, like fire axes and sledgehammers. Both unleash blows capable of turning individual enemies into beef stew, as well as unleashing charged attacks perfect for thinning larger groups. These latter table-turners, which slowly siphon from the protagonist's regenerating stamina pool, provide area-of-effect attacks — leaping off a train-car to let loose the sledgehammer's shockwave is especially rewarding.

Dying Light, as mentioned in our previous coverage, also sports a full day/night cycle, which brings both beauty and beasts to the post-apocalyptic proceedings; this time out, however, we got to see it in action while playing. Though the sun setting over a shantytown can be a lovely sight, the creatures roaming its darkened streets aren't so easy on the eyes. Our playable slice featured various shuffling freaks during the day — from human/zombie hybrids to vehicle-hurling hulks — but it's the monstrous Volatiles that only come out at night. Rippling with mutated muscles, these night-stalkers

VIRAL VISION: *Dying Light*'s protagonist is infected, granting him a "Pulse" power that allows him to see threats in the dark and through walls.



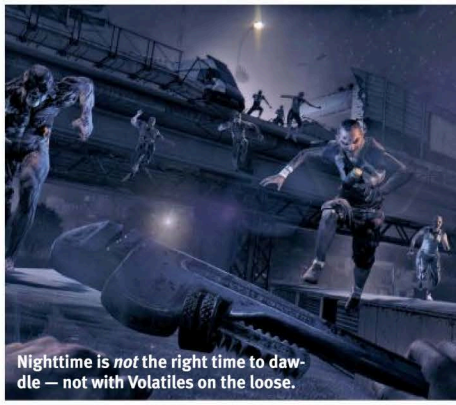
As a more acrobatic character, sliding, kicking, and *slide-kicking* all figure into your repertoire of moves.

These zombies are smarter than your average reanimated bear — they can climb train cars and follow you.

shouldn't be trifled with. In fact, we nearly broke a sweat attempting to ditch a handful of Volatiles in an abandoned train yard before finally making for our safehouse.

Outside of mad dashes to safety, we also dug into some of *Dying Light*'s critical and optional missions. A story-driving objective sent us looking for explosives and identifying a member of a doomed recon mission, but the optional challenge actually packed more thrills. We received an especially nice adrenaline jolt when we had to reach a supply drop before a group of human adversaries got to the goods; following a desperate, hair-raising run through the dilapidated town, we were met by gun-toting militia goons who weren't in the sharing mood. Still, as we walked away from the drop zone, empty-handed, we realized that getting there was half the fun.

Dying Light's aiming to inject some new ideas into the increasingly common zombie game formula, while not straying too far from the undead-decapitating action fans crave. It's most interesting addition is easily the inclusion of *Mirror's Edge*-like first-person free-running; on top of being an absolute blast to control, this acrobatic approach possesses the potential to affect the fight-or-flight nature of horror games. If Techland can tie this mechanic to both the gameplay and story in ways that feel more organic than awkward, we'll happily pound our feet on blood-stained blacktop. **– MATT CABRAL**



Nighttime is *not* the right time to dawdle — not with Volatiles on the loose.

KILLER QUARTET: Our demo was focused on single-player only, but we're guessing — like *Dead Island*'s 4-player co-op support proved — *Dying Light* will be even more fun with friends.

In the demo we played, Dolph Ziggler's finisher was the sleeper-hold; a move he hasn't won with in ages. Hopefully that will be updated by launch.

WWE 2K14

Accompanied by a new manager!

PLATFORM Xbox 360 **PUB** 2K Sports **DEV** Yuke's Co. Ltd **MULTIPLAYER** Yes **RELEASES** October 29 **FOR FANS OF** *WWE Legends of Wrestlemania*, feats of strength

LIKE A WRESTLER WHO'S cut loose his devious manager but has yet to be embraced by the fanbase, the WWE videogame franchise is at a weird crossroads. The franchise is free from its former keepers at the perpetually cash-strapped THQ and now aligned with the bigger guns at 2K Sports, who've ruled arenas for years with the dominant *NBA 2K* series. However, proper character change takes time; so while we've seen some slight improvements in *WWE 2K14*, it'll take a little more time in the ring with this grappler before we declare it a legend.

Though the gameplay's ultimate fate is still in the air, we're confident that the roster will overpower any iteration of the series we've seen yet. Games like *Legends of Wrestlemania* and *WWE All-Stars* brought considerable star power to the table, but did so by skimping on the modern roster. Previous games in the *Smackdown vs. Raw* series offered a hodgepodge of superstars, sometimes putting in odd anachronistic choices like best-known-in-WCW Arn Anderson at the expense of current WWE talent. Last year's focus on the late '90s "Attitude" era was a positive step, giving the roster a bit more focus (even if that meant that stars of the '80s were eschewed for the likes of The Godfather).

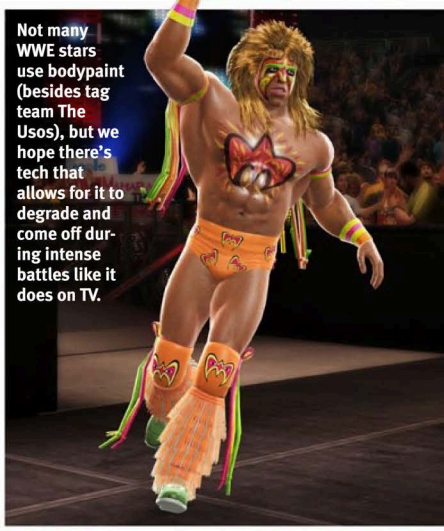
Our hands-on time with *WWE 2K14* offered a slim playable cast, but it was one that split the roster just the way we like it, mixing current stars (John Cena, Dolph Ziggler), attitude-laden '90s fighters (Shawn Michaels, The Rock, Stone Cold Steve Austin), and larger-than-life '80s legends (The Ultimate Warrior, "Macho Man" Randy Savage). *WWE 2K14* senior designer Bryan Williams promised a roster "comparable" to the *WWE '13* — which was the franchise's largest yet — so we have high hopes for *2K14*'s star power.

The gameplay tweaks we've seen so far make for a slightly smoother — and better-looking — fight as well. The animation has been adjusted so that superstars move through the ring quicker and more naturally. Seeing the characters engage in quick idle animations like fiddling with their ringwear and accelerating to a sprint when pressing the run button make the movements slightly less robotic than found in previous years.

The combat is faster paced, to boot, with speedier strikes giving you more options outside of grappling; reversals, for their part, have been tweaked to curtail endless back-and-forth, instead turning the original reversal into an attack. In the matches we took part in, these adjustments led to more tactical battles, as we knew a predictable attack on a prone enemy could easily turn the tide of a match against us. Also, *WWE '13*'s "one count" glitch is gone, meaning

NEXT MATCH: Check out *oxmonline.com/wwe* around the end of August for a new *2K14* preview, which will likely include campaign details and info on the full roster. Oh yeah, dig it!

New "OMG" moves include this brutal kick against the post, a devastating DDT to the side of the apron, and finishers like the AA, Shellshock, and Chokeslam on two opponents simultaneously.



Not many WWE stars use bodypaint (besides tag team The Usos), but we hope there's tech that allows for it to degrade and come off during intense battles like it does on TV.

The Ultimate Game

WWE 2K14 pre-order bonus wrestler The Ultimate Warrior describes the kind of game he'd like to see his larger-than-life persona star in...

"I always thought The Ultimate Warrior character has had a heart as big as his body, but he's also had a ruthlessness — nothing evil would be beyond him. I see him being able to, without any thought or hesitation whatsoever, just rip the heart out of people. The character [would behave the way he did] in the comic book: every time he answers a challenge, a piece of flesh from [his vanquished opponents gets] wrapped around his arms.

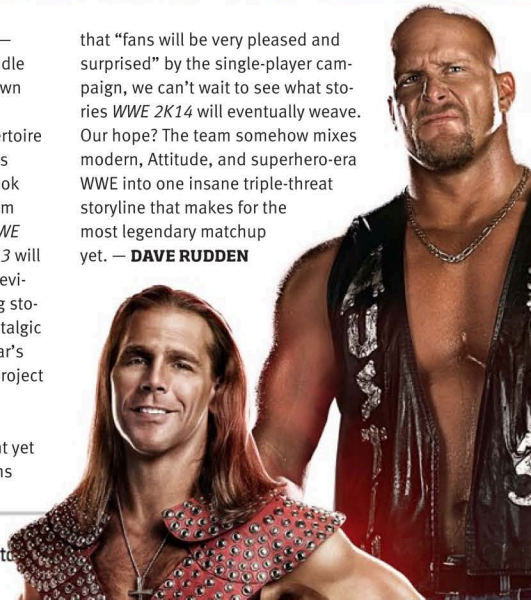
"[In the comic books], the idea was by the time that initial comic-book universe storyline was set, he'd have eight of them. They've all got different personalities, sort of like the seven dwarves. Each one, when he goes beyond the setting of the comic book universe, competes for his attention and can influence how he'll act. Whether he'll behave, or act with heart, or choose ruthlessness, or obey wisdom... I thought the development of that in a game would be awesome."

He may be AWOL in WWE as of late, but The Rock is in full force in _WWE 2K14_ as the cover athlete.

suspense will actually exist during pinfalls — computer-controlled opponents have a middle ground between kicking out and staying down for the count.

The biggest move in _WWE_'s annual repertoire is one they chose not to unleash as of press time. The single-player campaign, which took the form of the "Road to Wrestlemania" from _WWE Smackdown vs. Raw 2009_ through _WWE '12_ and the "Attitude Era Mode" of _WWE '13_ will return in some form in _WWE 2K14_. With previous iterations offering unique, entertaining storylines (via Road to Wrestlemania) or a nostalgic look back at the WWE's heyday (via last year's mode), we have high hopes that 2K's project can innovate once again.

Between a roster that has the potential to bring the best talent yet and a promise from Williams that "fans will be very pleased and surprised" by the single-player campaign, we can't wait to see what stories _WWE 2K14_ will eventually weave. Our hope? The team somehow mixes modern, Attitude, and superhero-era WWE into one insane triple-threat storyline that makes for the most legendary matchup yet. — **DAVE RUDDEN**



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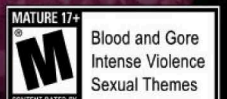


KILLER IS DEAD

All launch copies come with an 80-page hardcover art book, a soundtrack CD, and bonus DLC content!

Bonus DLC content contains the following in-game items:

1. Gigolo Glasses
2. Alternate costumes for Vivienne and Mika
3. A bonus Gigolo Mission with Betty
4. An additional episode with the vampiric Sebastian

PS3 PlayStation 3

PlayStation Network

XBOX 360

KILL

Below

What lies beneath the surface of this Xbox One exclusive?

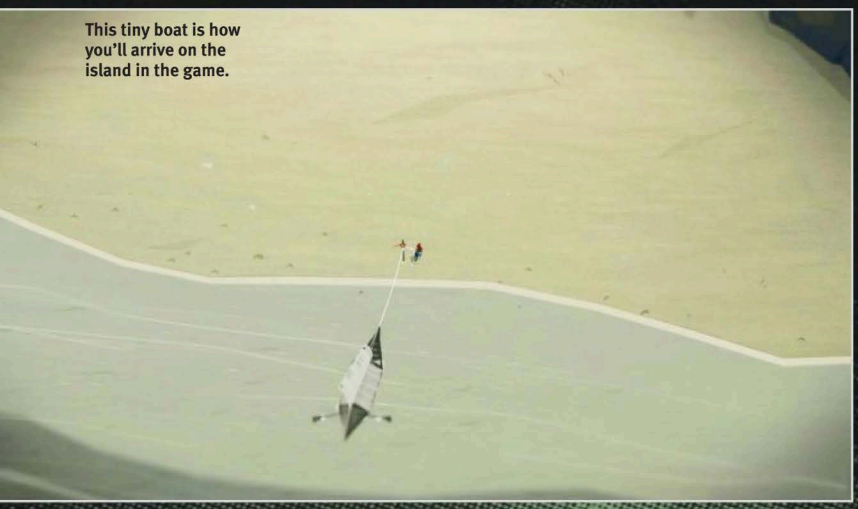
PUB Microsoft Studios **DEV** Capybara Games **MULTIPLAYER** Yes **RELEASES** 2014 **FOR FANS OF** Jim Guthrie, "roguelike-likes," minimalism

FIRST LOOK

REVEALED AS PART OF Microsoft's bombastic E3 press conference, *Below* stood out like a sore thumb, with dreamy music playing as one tiny character navigated a vast, subtly-colored environment. It was arguably one of the biggest surprises of E3 — Microsoft putting its backing so firmly behind Capybara Games (a Toronto studio best known so far for iOS hit *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP*), that it placed a minute-long trailer for something so wilfully obscure and difficult to understand smack dab in the middle of its biggest day of the year. But just what is it? We caught up with Capy's head honcho, Nathan Vella, to chat about that very thing.

Problem is, he was a bit coy about it, only really going so far as describing the game as Capy's "crazy-weird take on roguelike-meets-*Zelda*-meets-I-don't-even-know-what." That brevity, however, ties into the concept of the game. The independent studio's games up to this point have worn their heart on their sleeve, as exemplified by jokey dialogue in the upcoming, time-bending XBLA platformer *Super Time Force* (inspired by '80s action flicks), as well as by fey indie darling *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP*'s ability to tweet the innermost thoughts of the entire cast. By comparison, *Below* stands out, as the game is intended to include no text at all.

"There are no tutorials, there are no explanations, there are no menus," Vella tells us. "That's not saying there isn't a story or there aren't...details or information, but it's just presented in a very different way.



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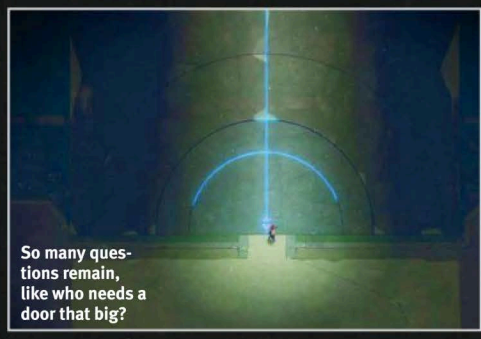

So many questions remain, like who needs a door that big?

"The big catchword here is exploration," he explains. "If you survive long enough and explore enough, that's when the discovery component comes in. That's when players will start learning more about the world they're in, the history of it, their goals as the player in these depths — all that stuff will come. You get to explore all that yourself, and it's not meant to be something that we're constantly holding your hand through, [be it] gameplay or the story of the game; it's yours to explore and hopefully to discover."

There is one thing that Vella isn't shy talking about, however: you will die. A lot. Inspired by the roguelike genre (see "Roguelike...Like?" sidebar), *Below* is intended to scratch the hardcore itch.

"When we were talking about *Below* originally," he tells us, "it was pre-*Dark Souls*, pre-*Spelunky*, pre- all these games that ended up proving that people were very interested in games that were more difficult than easy, that were about providing the player with almost insurmountable odds and acknowledging that

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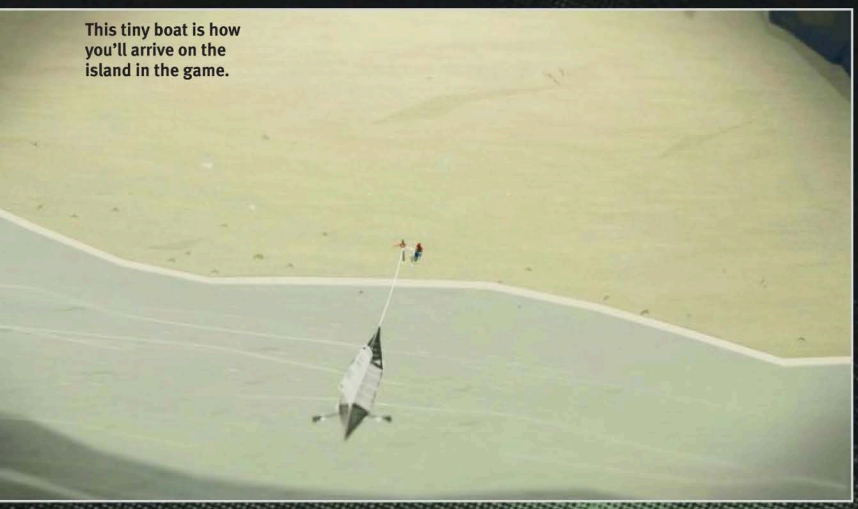

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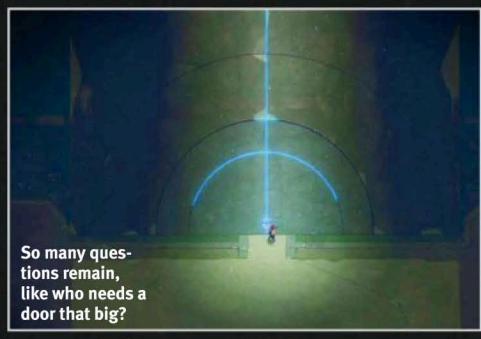

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WORD OF MOUTH #2: He continues, "Maybe I just [explained] how you do big-budget games where you're not giving everything away. Maybe you rely on players to do the word-of-mouth promotion for you..."

During a gameplay trailer for *Below*, the hero is besieged by those looming black tentacles at the bottom of the screen.

Vella ties that right back into the themes of the game: "You're a small character in a giant, almost unending depth. It's a very direct one-to-one: you're small, you're weak."

However, it's not all going to be squinting painfully at a tiny, helpless character: Vella does reveal that the game will feature in-depth combat to ensure that despite its difficulty, it will always feel fair. "It's not *Torchlight* or *Diablo* — weapons have much more substantial meaning," he offers. "It's a lot about situational combat, having multiple options and knowing strategically when you're going to need to play defensively, when to have your shield up and try to poke, when to run in and do a lunging strike or when to equip a ranged weapon — or working out if you even want to play with a ranged weapon. It's really meant to be relatively simple, but I think that's where the depth comes from. If you just run through the game constantly hacking and slashing, you will die, and you will die quickly."

Even when we finish our chat with Vella, it would be hard to say (yet) that we know quite what to make of *Below*. Capybara Games is holding its cards very close to its chest, hoping the mystery only makes us want to explore *Below* more. So far, it's working. —**MATTHEW KUMAR**

Below's soundtrack is composed by Jim Guthrie, who also handled the soundtrack for *Indie Game: The Movie*.

We Grill Capy's Nathan Vella for More Answers...

Does it have multiplayer?
"It's not just single-player; there is a multiplayer component that's meant to be pretty important to the game."

What's the music going to be like?
"I think it's impossible for [composer] Jim [Guthrie] to do anything traditional. It is going to be fundamentally different from *Sworcery*."

What weapons will there be?
"There are more weapons than a sword and shield... there are bows and arrows, there's a guy carrying an axe, there's a spear gun... but the game is not going to be a loot haul."

Does the hero level-up?
"We're not really talking about that, but there are definitely stronger weapons, there are better shields, there are different ways of playing attack and defense that will open up as things progress."

Is it an RPG?
"It's not really meant to be an RPG. You don't have a treasure chest strapped to your back where you carry 45 different things, and you can hotswap between all this different stuff."

Are there bosses?
"There are definitely going to be large moments in the game, that I *can* say!"

WORD OF MOUTH #3: "...rather than spending the 20 million dollars up-front and just hoping that...bombastic Dubstep trailers will push it," Vella concludes.

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The trip through that imposing man-made wall was not without its challenges — like dispatching these leaping chumpwads.

Destiny

Bungie's post-*Halo* project in action, at last

PLATFORMS Xbox 360, Xbox One **PUB** Activision **DEV** Bungie **MULTIPLAYER** Yes **RELEASES** 2014 **FOR FANS OF** Crazy-ambitious projects, playing with friends

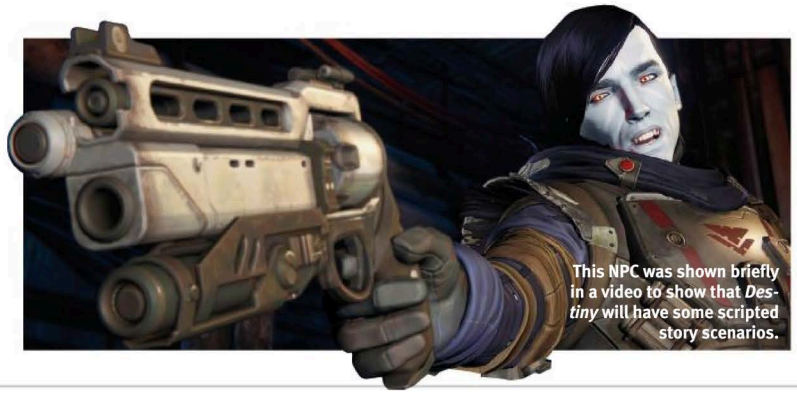
UPDATE

WHEN ACTIVISION AND Bungie finally announced the fruits of their highly-publicized partnership earlier this year, fans were left with far more questions than answers. Aside from cryptically calling *Destiny* a "shared world shooter" that wasn't quite a traditional FPS or an MMO, it seemed they weren't ready to reveal much more than the game's high-concept ambitions.

Thankfully, the team was a bit more forthcoming in recent months, sharing new intel but also gameplay demos. While our behind-closed-doors look at Bungie's first post-*Halo* project still just skimmed the surface of its abundant potential, it had no problem getting our pulses racing in anticipation of its 2014 arrival.

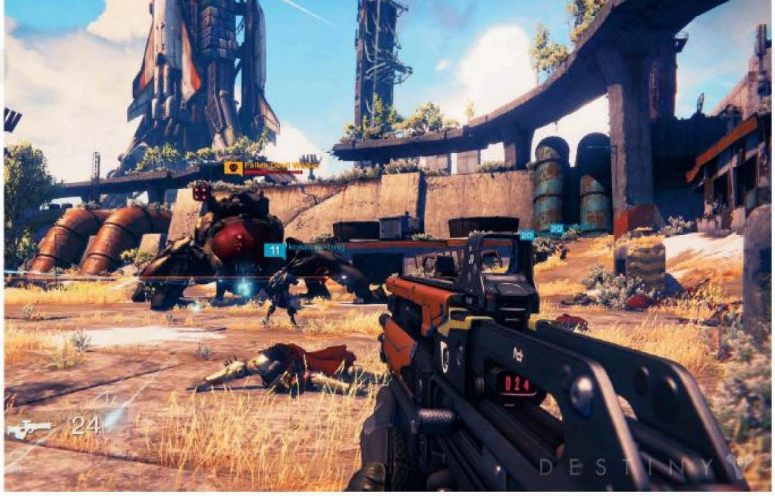
Opening in a far-future Russia, the camera pans over beautiful mountains framed above and below by blue skies and water. That changes, however, when the shot slows over a stretching graveyard of rusted vehicles, all abandoned save for a few skeletal remains still occupying drivers' seats. This scene also introduces the Fallen, one of *Destiny*'s evil-doing factions; sporting four arms and exoskeleton-like armor, the monsters look like they share some DNA with *Star Wars: Episode III*'s multi-limbed menace, General Grievous.

The hostile ghouls streak toward a dropship carrying a Guardian — *Destiny*'s player-created

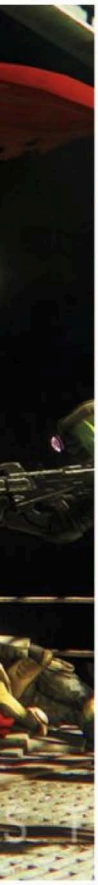


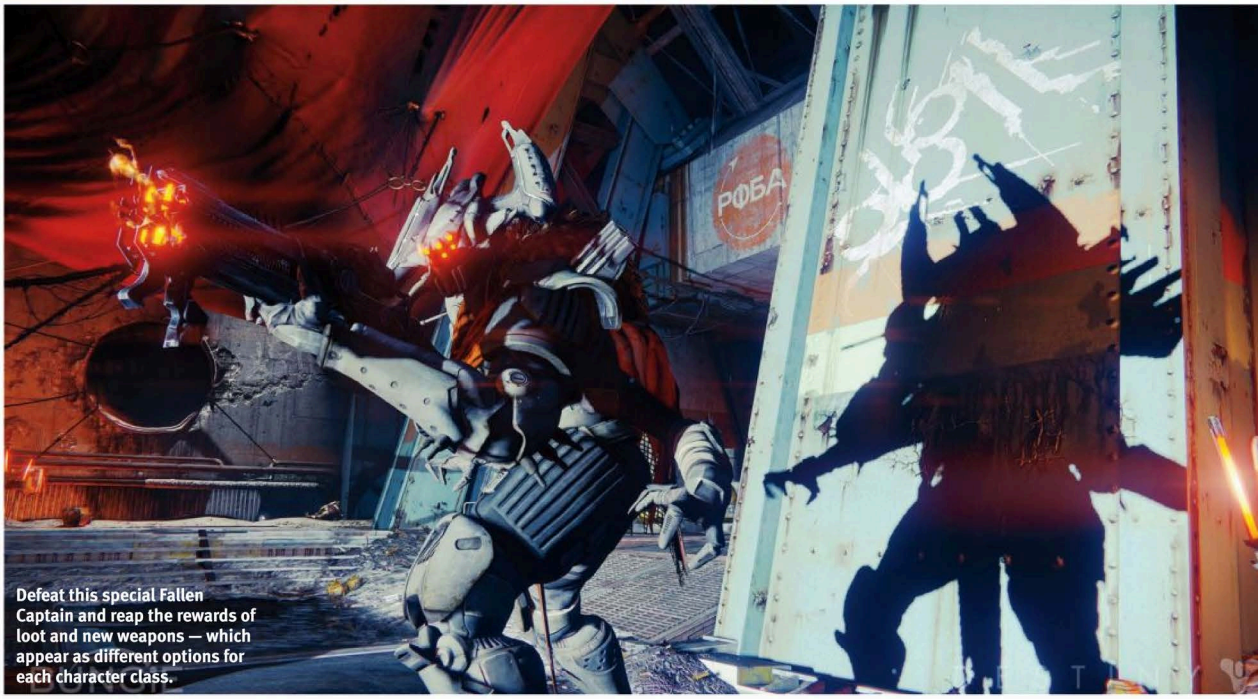
This NPC was shown briefly in a video to show that *Destiny* will have some scripted story scenarios.

PLAYER PREFERENCE: *Destiny*'s customizable Guardians come in a variety of classes, including the so-far-revealed Warlocks, Hunters, and Titans.



ABOVE: *Destiny*'s version of *Charlie's Angels*: meet the Hunter, Titan, and Warlock (left to right). **LEFT:** The "public space" battle is a coordinated effort that you can opt into while in progress — or breeze past if you're not in the mood.





Defeat this special Fallen Captain and reap the rewards of loot and new weapons — which appear as different options for each character class.

protagonists. We get our first real glimpse of gameplay as our hero is joined by a second player; together, they decide to carve their way through an imposing Great Wall of China-like barrier in order to meet up with a third Guardian on the other side. Within the passage through the wall, we're treated to more of *Destiny*'s impressive presentation: while the interior corridors and catwalks aren't significantly different from those we've exchanged plasma fire in before, they clearly benefit from the inclusion of next-gen–powered visual details and bar-raising lighting tech.

Speaking of pretty shiny things, it's around this time we're introduced to "ghosts," tiny drones with dry senses of humor — after being released by one of the Guardians, the flying bot quips, "We always visit such cheerful places." The ghost illuminates a darkened path and hacks into the wall's electrical system, but we're guessing these robo-pals may also fill a Cortana-like companion role in the final game.

Over the next few minutes we witness the Guardians engage in brutal firefights with various types of Fallen; between laser-spitting floaters, foot soldiers, and a sub-boss who ground-pounds and growls a lot, there's no shortage of targets for them to unload on with everything from hand-cannons to elemental-like powers. With the big bad turned into a scrap heap, our duo basks in the literally glowing loot left behind.

The demo doesn't dig deep into *Destiny*'s RPG side, but the players do briefly examine their new goodies in a weapon skill-tree menu that could make *Borderlands*' "gun-porn" enthusiasts blush. Now armed with an enormous rifle, the main player follows a glimmer of sunlight — and his partner — to the other side of the wall.

Outside, they unite with the third player and *Destiny* smoothly shifts from a co-op experience to a massively multiplayer one. In addition to the trio, the screen is soon filled with other human-controlled characters eager to join the fight. Good thing, too, because their numbers are quickly met with swarms of enemy infantry, drop-ships, and a Devil Walker. The latter threat — a giant spidery mech — puts up one hell of a fight, but is eventually thwarted by the heavily-armed participants of this "public event."

As the Devil Walker goes down, we're left with twitchy fingers and a lot of unanswered questions. While we're grateful for this meaty chunk of in-game action — as well as a taste of how *Destiny* morphs from personal, small-scale co-op shooter to MMO-flavored free-for-all — the ambitious project still has so many secrets to reveal. Still, if any stock can be held in promise and potential, Bungie better prepare to spend another gaming generation in the spotlight.

– MATT CABRAL

TEAM TALK: Showcasing *Destiny*'s focus on cooperative play, our demoers frequently talked strategy, exchanged banter, and compared loot.

Take him out, or distract him? It's entirely up to you.

Thief

Is it a scene-stealer or a daylight robbery?

PLATFORM Xbox 360, Xbox One **PUB** Square-Enix **DEV** Eidos Montreal **MULTIPLAYER** No **RELEASES** Early 2014 **FOR FANS OF** Sticking to the shadows, keeping quiet

HANDS-ON

AT E3 WE finally managed to steal a go on what the *Deus Ex: Human Revolution* team has moved on to next — and the biggest surprise is that it didn't quite manage to make off with our hearts.

The problem certainly doesn't lie at a conceptual level. *Thief*'s premise — as master thief Garrett, you'll break into a number of bourgeois strongholds using only your wits and a whole lotta arrows — is a tantalizing one, and its levels are structured in a way that allows you to approach each one creatively.

The level we played saw Garrett sneak into Northcrest Manor to pilfer a treasure known as The Heart of the Lion. The stage was split into roughly three segments — two infiltration segments set in the courtyard and the mansion itself, and an escape section which comes on strong like the fleeing-from-the-guards sequences in *Assassin's Creed*, with third-person clambering, burning buildings and all.

Rewinding to the courtyard for the second, it's clear that despite the fact the *Thief* series' heritage goes back over a decade, this reboot is a very contemporary stealth-action hybrid. Most tellingly, Garrett no longer has to rely on a moldy map to get his bearings; instead he's now equipped with the genre-wide plot contrivance known as "Focus" — a non-replenishable resource that enables him to highlight enemy locations and interesting geographical features, such as crags he can hook his rope arrow onto to reach higher ground, or precarious looking barrels which can be tipped onto unsuspecting guards' noggins.

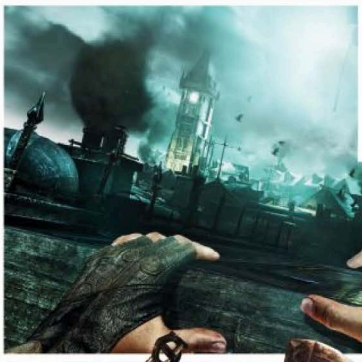
Focus is a precious resource, and that makes avoiding conflict all the more important, as Garrett is a bit of a clumsy clod in battle unless he activates his Focus. When he does so, small circles appear around your assailant's body — striking him on the chin will deal an instant KO, giving you time to scramble to the shadows. Without it, you're likely to attract further unwanted attention until you're leading a conga line of angry guards, kind of like a Pied Piper of jerks. If this happens, you'd do well to hit the restart button as Garrett's a sneaker, not a fighter.

Fortunately, the levels are rich with tactical opportunities. Moving from shadow to shadow is the most effective way to keep out of trouble, aided by a "swoop" dive of sorts that gifts you a short burst of speed over short distances. Additionally you can create your own shadows by snuffing out flames with water arrows, or you can fire blunt arrows at nothing in particular to distract guards, allowing you to sneak off in the other direction.

Better still, you can aim for higher ground using the aforementioned rope arrows, although in the wide-open courtyard this left us exposed to the archers up on the ramparts. After many unfortunate "incidents," we finally managed to break into the mansion via more creative means — by diving into a nearby building and switching off the supply to a nearby water fountain. Although this meant it was no longer there to drown out our footsteps, it opened up a new unguarded pathway into the manor. Success!

The creativity is there, but we weren't so

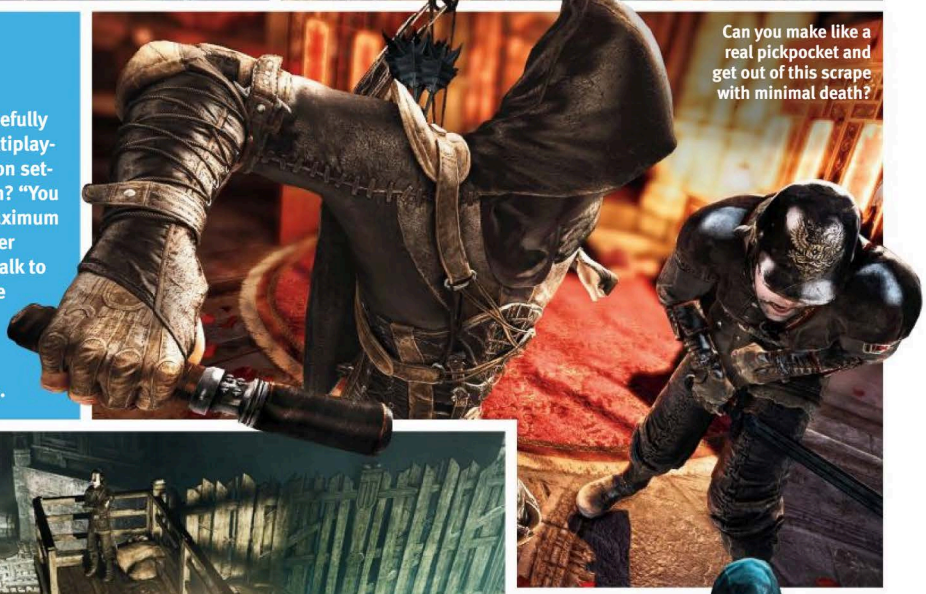
FAVORITE ARROW: When we asked Roy what his favorite arrow is in the game, he told us: "The blunt arrow. You can't kill with it, but *Thief* is about stealing, not killing."



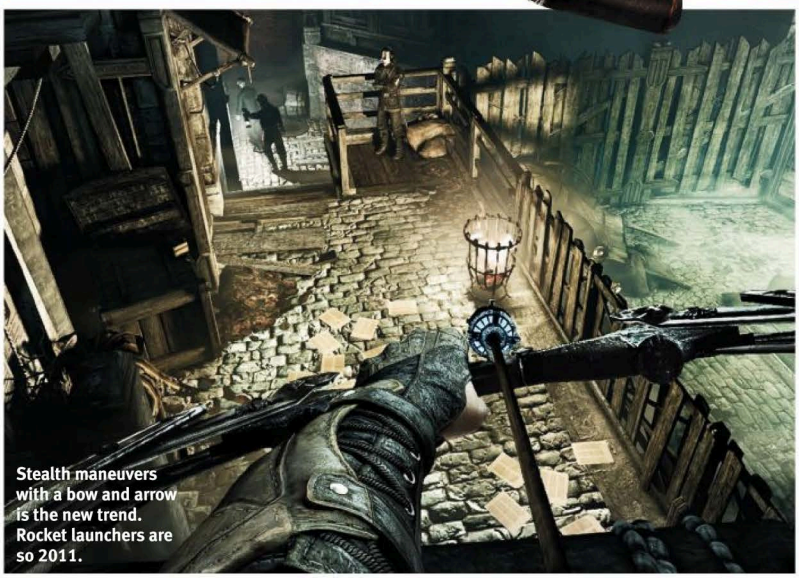
FAR LEFT That glowing eye actually works to your benefit as it enables Garrett's "Focus" ability. **BELOW** C'mon up, the coast is clear for clandestine hijinks.

Happy Hardcore?

Thief occupies a niche: a purposefully paced stealth game without multiplayer, modern-day gadgets, or action set-pieces. Does this worry the team? "You hope your vision reaches the maximum amount of people," says producer Stephane Roy. "We're going to talk to the fans, but we'll give you some options to turn off if you don't want them. We hope it sells to everyone." Formerly next-gen only, it's now coming to 360 too.



Can you make like a real pickpocket and get out of this scrape with minimal death?



Stealth maneuvers with a bow and arrow is the new trend. Rocket launchers are so 2011.

We suspect Garrett's iPod is stuffed with death metal playlists.

convinced about the mechanics. *Thief* is a tricky game, which is no bad thing in itself (in fact, it's kind of refreshing), but we weren't always sure whether it was by design. For a master thief, Garrett makes for quite a lumbering hero, and we didn't always feel like we had the litheness to do our battle plans justice. This meant we were clocked often, and while in many stealth games the chase is just the beginning, here in Northcrest Manor it was terminal. The courtyard wasn't expansive enough for us to make an effective getaway.

It reminded us of *Dishonored* in many ways, but with all its best toys locked away. We came away only slightly disappointed with a game we had pegged as one of the Xbox One's first true home runs — but there's still more than enough promise (and time, as the game doesn't release until 2014) here for *Thief* to steal us back.

– ALEX DALE

XBOX ONE-POWERED: So, anything spiffy that *Thief*'s doing with Xbox One's increased power? "It's not a question of pushing more polygons, but convincing you that you're part of this city," says Roy.

Tamriel United

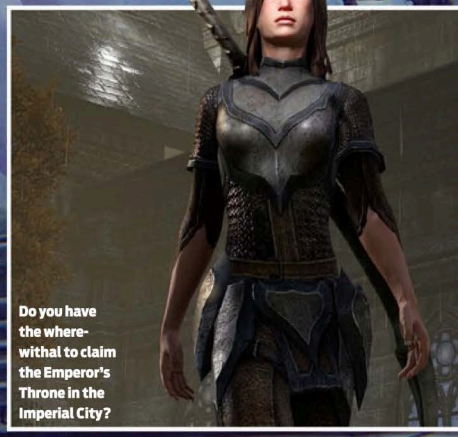
The Elder Scrolls Online brings all of the worlds we know and love together. But is it the right game for *Skyrim* veterans?

By Jon Blyth

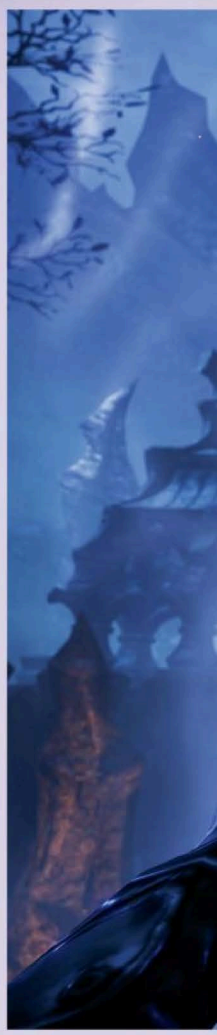
In the first two hours of our Nord Dragonknight's life, he's swum among the ice floes of Skyrim, nipped through a quick Oblivion gate to mess with a perverse sigil, slinked through a booby-trapped tomb, and taken a ferry to the mushroom-littered shores of Morrowind. You can almost envision Zenimax Online standing with their hands on their hips, booming "Oh, yes! We've *got* Tamriel..." at us.

The first multiplayer *Elder Scrolls* game is coming to Xbox One, and while no one's saying "MMO," that's precisely what it is. The events unfold 1000 years before the Dragonborn was saved from execution by a dragon attack, and 800 years before Patrick Stewart burst into our prison cells and urged us to try out his tutorial dungeon. *The Elder Scrolls Online* is set during a period in Tamriel's history called the Interregnum. That's not a made-up word — England had an interregnum of its own in 1811, when there was no ruling monarch on the throne, and the term can be used to refer to the "gap" between when a US president is elected in November and when the role actually begins the following January. Tamriel's Interregnum, however, is a little more mysterious than something as simple (or convoluted, depending on your perspective) as US government policy.

"*The Elder Scrolls Online* takes place in the second era," says Phil Sage, creative director at Zenimax Online. He's referring to the 896-year-long period that kicked off with the fall of the Cyrodilic Empire. "The Interregnum [is] a fifty-year period where there's no record of what happened. Our game [fills] in that gap." It's a narrative convenience that lets Zenimax



Do you have the wherewithal to claim the Emperor's Throne in the Imperial City?



ABOVE Having conquered much of Tamriel in the past, Nords have some entitlement issues... **RIGHT** Bretons have a propensity for magic. **BELOW** A glimpse of Stros M'Kai at dawn.

Picking a Fight

What if you want to kill other people?

When you reach Level 10, you'll able to play in Cyrodiil's Player vs. Player zones. There, any member of the two opposing factions can (and will) attack and kill you. Everyone participating will have their stats scaled to match a Level 50 character, but players who've naturally climbed to higher levels through playing will get access to a wider palette of skills and equipment. Fighting in these PvP battles awards Alliance Points, which you can spend on various items of your choosing — an alternate path to acquiring loot if you're always busy killing friends instead of NPCs.

Online tell new stories without fear of someone pushing their glasses up their nose and starting a sentence with the dread phrase: "Well, *actually*, I think you'll find..."

In this particular span of time, the nine playable races of Tamriel have split into three factions. The Ebonheart Pact consists of the dark-elf Dunmer, Viking-esque Nords, and the eccentric reptilian Argonians, and its members feature prominently in the opening missions, which involve a panicked evacuation from Bleakrock. Why the mass exodus? Well, the second faction, the Daggerfall Covenant — consisting of the self-important Bretons, the warrior Redguards, and the barbarian Orcs — are on the attack.

The third faction, which doesn't appear at all in our demo, is composed of the high-elf Altmer, the wood-elf Bosmer, and, somewhat unexpectedly (given the predominance of elves in this group), the cat-like Khajiit. There's a deliberate mismatch in the groupings here — Nords and Dunmer are not races you'd expect to be fighting alongside one another. These are alliances of convenience and survival, not love.

THE FIRST TWO HOURS

"Play as each of our alliances, and you'll [get] completely different content," Sage explains as the Ebonheart Pact's prologue unfolds. The story of our Dragonknight begins in Bleakrock, a Nordic town that's new yet immediately familiar thanks to the faithfully reproduced *Skyrim* designs. Other familiar places will include areas like Windhelm and Cyrodiil, but Zenimax has taken the opportunity to fill gaps on the maps. The Northern coast of Morrowind, for example, will be shown for the first time. There are also swathes of land that are featured, but grayed out — these are being prepped for the expansions.

You must choose a class, unlike in *Skyrim*, but the four on offer (see "A Different Class," page 47) are a small and intuitive selection. Selecting a healer won't prevent you from us-

Atronachs are beings mostly made up of a single, pure substance — and they certainly won't stand for the likes of you.

ing your preferred armor or weapons — if they so choose, Templars can replicate a healing/attacking Paladin-style build as well as a more background-healing role. However, though no rules bar, say, a stealthy Nightblade from wearing noisy, heavy armor, it should be obvious when you're undermining your own strengths.

Whatever class and race you choose, your character has had its soul stolen by the Daedric Prince of Jerks, Molag Bal. But at your low level, there's nothing you can do about that...yet. For now, it's time for some Level 1 busywork around Bleakrock: one woman's friends have been transformed rat-like Skeever creatures, and only we can revert the changes with a wand; Halmaera has lost her husband and dog, and wants you to find them. There's also an abandoned mine nearby, called "Hozzin's Folly"; for an area that's supposedly deserted, it's curiously well-guarded and full of miners.

It certainly feels like an MMO, and Zenimax has included details that, so far, reassure us that this'll be one worthy of its *Elder Scrolls* name: conversations are voice-acted, while over 1,000 books litter the world, adding lore and triggering quests. Everything feels purposeful, even if some of the missions in these early stages seem trivial and abrupt — for example, the sub-missions you complete in Bleakrock before deciding to evacuate determines how many survivors make it to the mainland. This creates the unusual situation in which your persistent world will be different to that of others. If you didn't save Halmaera's dog and husband, but your friend did, that pal's world will have NPCs that you won't come across or see.

Of those sub-missions, the most interesting is "Hozzin's Folly," which will let you practice your sneaking and subterfuge skills. We're given a bandit disguise to enter the camp, which shrinks the distance from which patrols could spot us. Crouching reduces

At least he had the decency to put some clothes on before leaving the cave.

If you like your soldiers scaly and stealthy, we heard that the Argonians are looking for new recruits.

that further, and brings up the "*Skyrim* eye," the icon in the center of the screen that alerts you to threats. We next walk in stealth past a guard, but it's not the best stealth — cones of vision seem to be ignored in favor of pure proximity, and our attempts to sneak behind NPCs result in our disguise's destruction upon being spotted. The result is our need to kill more bandits until a new disguise drops. It sounds convoluted, but the gameplay keeps in line with standard MMO fare.

In terms of gameplay design, many elements of classic *Elder Scrolls* have been transplanted directly into the *Online* game. You have three combat resources: Magicka for spellcasting; Stamina for blocking, dodging, and running; and health for, well, not being dead. Books, lockpicking, and guilds...they're all in place, as well. It's all very familiar, but it's also extremely different; if you're expecting to fool around in *TESO* the same way you would have in *Skyrim*, but just with a bunch of friends in the background, be warned: you'll have to find other ways to experience that. (More on that in just a moment.)

Happily, when it comes to visuals, there won't be any uncomfortable transition or adjustment necessary: Zenimax's nailed the look of Skyrim's architecture. You'll glimpse its beauty only after a bit of a trek; first, you'll have to endure an evacuation through a trap-laden tomb and a boat ride to Morrowind before finally glimpsing the hovering, jellyfish-like netches drifting stupidly among the vast, mushroom-strewn hills. But it's definitely worth the wait — *Morrowind* skipped a generation, and was last seen when TVs only had about 50 pixels on them. Seeing its visuals redone with brand-new technology is a bit of a spine-tingler.

GONE FISHIN'

The fact that *The Elder Scrolls Online* is an MMO has forced a shift of the spotlight. You're no longer in a playground built for one gamer's power fantasy; instead, you'll now be a part of a vibrant economy that has to serve everyone. This means that some of the quirky nonsense that came out of *Skyrim* has to fall by the wayside: a player can no longer

The Nords are probably one of the more iconic races in *TESO*.

LEFT Finding a DIY, all-you-can-eat crab buffet is a perk. **RIGHT** The Deshaan Plain harbors some lovely (and probably lethal) sights. **BELOW** The Ebonheart Pact: where Argonians and Dark Elves all make nicey-nice.

collect every wheel of cheese in the game to stockpile within his house, or try to buy a home without ever leveling up.

If these kind of limitations sound like a deal-breaker for you, there are still plenty of other ways to fill your time if you're critical-path–averse. "Fishing is one of our zen activities," explains Sage. It's a concept that's familiar to anyone who's played *World of Warcraft*: you find a fishing hole, slap a bit of bait on your fishing rod, and wait for something to nibble. To boost the social aspect of fishing, a fishing hole that's surrounded by fisherman won't become exhausted — it'll continue to provide even more (and more exotic, at that) fish.

Why would you want to fish? In order to cook your day's haul, of course. "Provisioning" is one of the five skills that keep objects moving through the world's economy, and it lets you convert raw food into stat-boosting meals that'll help you face down a threat. Alchemy, too, returns, with a system that's familiar in essence — you'll still find Nirnroot and Vampire Dust — but also much more complex than any of the previous games. It's a system of ingredients and effect-tweaking additives that'll have people experimenting with a huge variety of potential blends. "[It's] all about the social aspect," comments Sage. "We want people to compare results, to talk about what they're doing, and work out the system we've built."

FIGHTING FIT

Enchantment, armor, and weapon-smithing also play important roles in *The Elder Scrolls Online*, although each character will only be able to learn two of the skills. This, again, enforces sociability. You're not the Dragonborn, you're a soulless victim — and no single character can be self-sufficient. Trade and cooperation are essential.

In contrast to its MMO peers announced at this year's E3, combat in *Elders Scrolls Online* seems to be more of a blend of old-fashioned ideas. You won't find the gunarchy of Insomniac's *Sunset Overdrive* or the gritty battle set-pieces that seem to define Ubisoft's *The Division* here; your equipped weapon is capable of delivering a whittling barrage of attacks, to be backed up by a range of unlocked powers that damage, cripple, poison, shock, or bully your

Mix and Match

Your class isn't a prison

At *Elder Scroll Online*'s outset, the four class choices are intended to be a springboard — with half your powers provided to you by your weapons, there's a lot of overlap between the characters, and any class can be a healer with a Restoration Staff.

While you'll never see an branching skill tree in *TESO*, you *will* be asked at certain points in your character's development to make a decision. Do you want to take a path that'll boost your character's damage, or defense? Giving you the chance to make these choices after you've worked out your combat style lets you make a more informed decision, since how you play will be dictated more by the weapon you're carrying than your class.

ABOVE: This Centurion won't be an easy slay; you'll find this lug ready to do battle with you in the Dwemer ruins. **BELOW:** High-Elf Queen Ayrenn is the leader of the Aldmeri Dominion — which includes the feline-faced Khajiit race. **RIGHT:** The Viking-like Nords have thrown in with the Dark Elves and Argonians (shown here) to find a way to take down the Empire.

enemies with a layer of strategy. Classic stuff.

The Dragonknight-class skills can progress, at first, along three paths: Ardent Flame, Earthen Heart, and Draconic Power. Ardent Flame's first ability lets you shoot out a fiery chain that yanks your opponent close to you; its second ability is a melee flame swipe. This gives you a chance to snatch one enemy out of a crowd and do some damage before his friend turns up and the battle gets hectic. (One enemy tends to be easy; two, tricky; and three suicidal. But MMO enemies tend to be restricted to loosely defined areas, so it's expected they won't follow you across the continent, like a stubborn *Skyrim* guard.) Earthen Heart lets you summon a stony fist that stuns your enemy for a few seconds — useful for crowd control when that second enemy arrives. Then there's Draconic Power, whose first offering is Spiked Armor, an ability that returns some damage to the jerk or jerk creature who inflicted it.

So far, so typical — the three-branched skill tree is a staple of RPG development. But *TESO* tips its hat to previous games by giving each class of weapon its own set of skills. So, if you find yourself specializing with a bow, you'll unlock bow-specific powers, like Poison Arrow, which adds damage over time to a successful strike, or Volley, which provides punishing amounts of area damage.

There's also an element of dodge and timing — although it's one tailored to the possible lag of the MMO format and connectivity. Enemies will "telegraph" special attacks, giving you a chance to respond. If you see a swirl of white lines, they're planning a strong attack, which

ABOVE: The Daggerfall Covenant is led by the Breton High King, Emeric. BELOW: With all the alliances going on, we're surprised this giant spider doesn't want in on one.

A Different Class

While there are only four starting classes in *The Elder Scrolls Online*, choosing one doesn't limit you in the same way it traditionally does in most MMOs. Your role in group-combat can be tweaked by your load-out, and progression will offer further opportunities to specialize. To that end, there are no weapon or armor restrictions — you'll just choose what's best for the occasion.

TEMPLAR

A Paladin by any other name is still a holy, healing warrior. The Templar has a range of light-based attacks, including the rapid-use Sun Strike and Sun Fire (yes, it's a fireball), while Rushed Ceremony is a rapid healing attack that's essential in larger skirmishes.

DRAGON KNIGHT

The Dragon Knight is a flexible enough class that you can choose to specialize as a damage-soaking tank...or a much frailer healer. Fiery Reach is a basic skill, dragging opponents close enough to use your other stun attacks.

SORCERER

Mages Guildmen, join here. The branches of magic open to you are damage-dealing Dark Magic, pet-summoning Daedric magic, and elemental-based Storm Summoning. Though you're free to equip any weapon, bows and staffs are best at keeping enemies at bay.

NIGHTBLADE

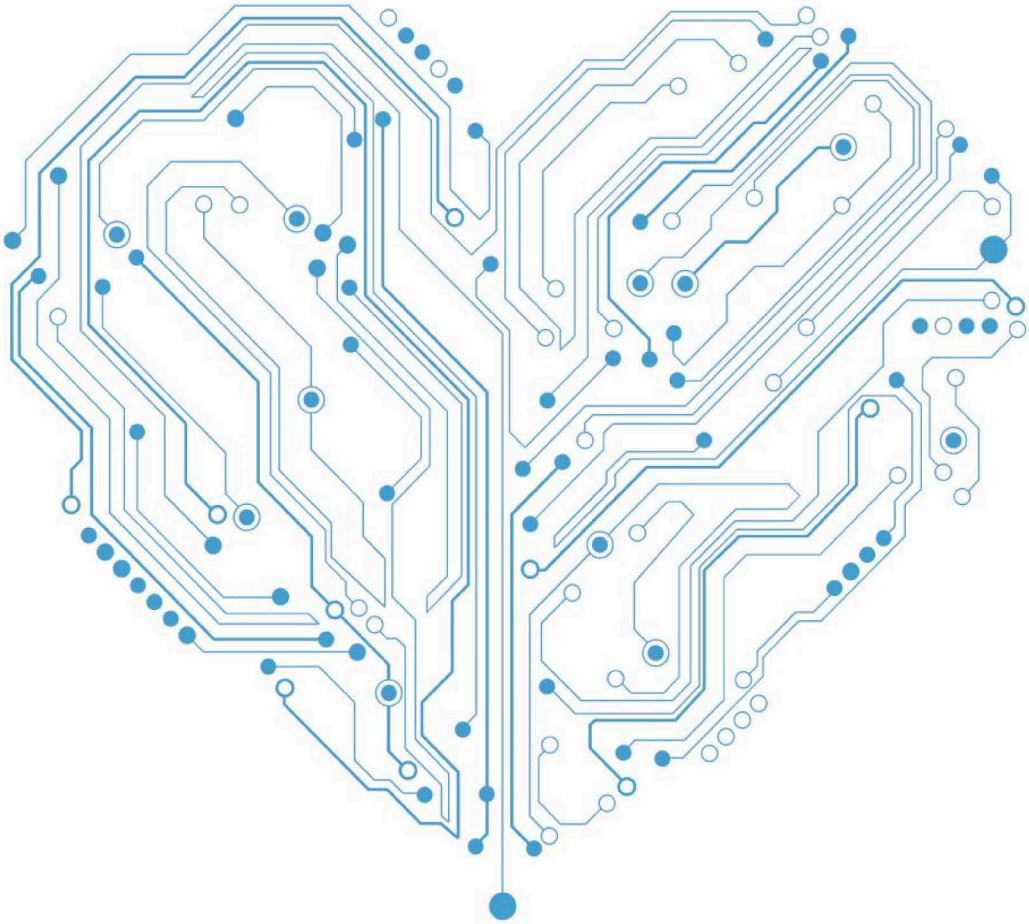
If you're more of a backstabbing shadow-creeper, it's wise to stick to light armor to keep your movements stealthy and quiet. Creeping around uses stamina, so while Sorcerers need Magicka, Stamina is the most important stat for the budding Nightblade.

you can counter with a block. This'll stagger them, giving you a chance to land your own strong-armed response by holding down the attack button. Other enemies flag an attack with a visible cone in front of them, giving you a chance to dodge-roll to the side.

Despite the plethora of mechanics and content that seem to be parts of *The Elder Scrolls Online* experience, it's impossible at the moment to tell if this MMO will abate the *Skyrim* itch. We've only played two hours, and that's no time at all when dealing with a genre that'll chew years out of your life, if you let it. All we can say for sure right now is that fans of *Morrowind*, *Oblivion*, and *Skyrim* should be prepared for a very different experience — but then again, MMOs are only ever as fun as the community that populates them, and judging from the community-made videos in response to *Oblivion* and *Skyrim*, its always-online counterpart should boast some of the most interesting, inventive, quirky, and hilarious players around. For that reason alone, *The Elder Scrolls Online* guarantees to be one hell of a ride.

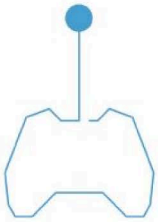
We all have our favorite games and gaming moments – those adventures that turned us into devoted fans willing to forego sleep for just one more level. But what about the folks passionate enough about videogames to actually start making them?

We asked development teams from Xbox's past, present, and future which defining moment or specific game inspired them to move beyond fandom and start on the path to becoming future designers, writers, programmers, and game creators. You may be surprised at some of their answers...



Must Love Games

By OXM Staff



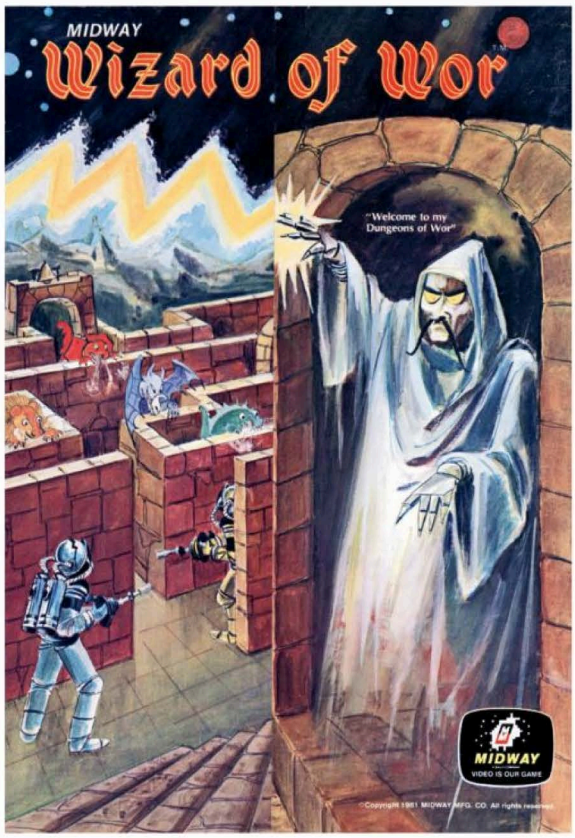
The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past

1 **IT'S DEFINITELY** the opening of *The Legend of Zelda: A Link to the Past*. Seeing Link walking in the rain made me draw pictures of how *Zelda* would look in a 3D world. **— Josef Fares, Swedish filmmaker, game director at Starbreeze Studios (*Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons*)**

2 **THE EARLIEST** inkling was when I was about 6 years old. I was obsessed with the art in the manual for *Final Fantasy* on the NES. I was also fascinated with building and construction sites. I remember telling my mom, "When I grow up, I either want to build houses, or make pictures for videogames." I guess with *Gone Home*, I'm finally doing both! **— Steve Gaynor, co-founder of The Fullbright Company (*Gone Home*), former lead level designer on *BioShock Infinite*, writer on *BioShock 2: Minerva's Den***

3 **I'VE ALWAYS** been a huge gamer, ever since the first Atari home console came out. I used to play everything that Sierra released. From *King's Quest* to *Police Quest* to *Gabriel Knight*, I spent a lot of my free time playing games while learning English at the same time — I'm French Canadian, and in those days most games were coming to us in English only. I had to play them with a blank sheet of paper next to me, writing down all the unknown words, looking them up in a French dictionary, and writing the proper translation next to them. It helped me to broaden my limited English vocabulary a lot.

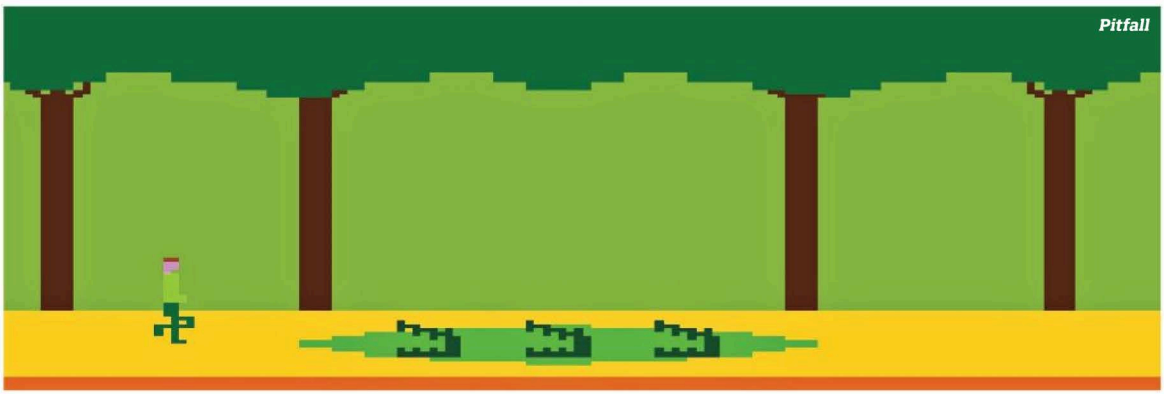
At the time, I dreamt about working as a designer at Sierra, but I knew it wouldn't be an option for me because of the language barrier (not to mention my total lack of experience). So, after university, I went back to college to complete a degree in computer arts and started to work in that field. Roughly at the same time, Ubisoft announced that they were opening a studio in Montreal and were already accepting resumes. Bam! I quit everything I was doing in life and I never looked back. **— Jean Francois Dugas, executive game director, Eidos Montreal (former lead game designer on *Deus Ex: Human Revolution*)**



"One summer my cousin took me to a Laundromat to play something called 'videogames.' There it was. A shiny *Wizard of Wor* stand-up machine towering above like a black monolith."

4 **ONE SUMMER** my cousin took me to a Laundromat to play something called "videogames." There it was. A shiny *Wizard of Wor* stand-up machine towering above like a black monolith. Suddenly, there were weird voices singing in my head — an uplift was taking place! Moments before I was only a fancy monkey but after, I was a Star Child. That was 30 years ago but I still feel that from time to time. **— Matthew Goldman, art director, BioWare (*Dragon Age* series)**

5 **I'VE BEEN** playing games since *Pong*, so narrowing it down to one experience is pretty tough, but the thing that got me really excited about [them] was *Pitfall* on the Atari 2600. I loved that game — I loved the fantasy of living like Indiana Jones. They had this promotion where if you took a picture of the [high-score] screen, you got a patch. I still have my patch from that. **— Jeff Weir, art director, 2K Marin (*The Bureau: XCOM Declassified*)**



Pitfall

Table Flipping

Inspiring game-design doesn't always require electricity

I WAS AN avid tabletop gamer from elementary school until my late '20s, and that ultimately led to a (very) brief professional stint. So you could say the big inspirations there were *Champions* (the classic superhero RPG), *Traveller*, and *GURPS* — all of which got me writing, drawing, and thinking about game mechanics, stats, and simulation at a young age.

Once I started playing games on PC and console, it took a while for me to embrace the idea that this is something I could — or *should* — do professionally. It was astonishment at deep immersive games like *Deus Ex* and *Half-Life* that got me thinking about how to build the necessary skillset. **— Patrick Redding, game director, Ubisoft Toronto (*Splinter Cell Blacklist*)**

PLAYING TABLETOP RPGs in high school. My friends and I started — like almost everyone probably did — with *Dungeons & Dragons*, but we ultimately tried all kinds of RPGs...*Shadowrun*, *Call of Cthulhu*, etc. Running a tabletop game is fascinating, because it's pure game design bounded by the rules of the RPG. There's no complicated technology involved; it's just the game system and the players.

I still play tabletop RPGs every week, but now it's usually more indie things like *Fiasco*, *Apocalypse World*, and *Dread*. Any designer, even those who work only in digital games, would learn a ton spending some time [playing] tabletop games. **— Nels Anderson, lead designer, Klei (*Mark of the Ninja*)**

DOOM

6 **I REMEMBER** one night being stuck in the mists of the first *Silent Hill* with almost no health, so the DualShock controller's heartbeat effect had been going on forever. [It was] to the point that subconsciously, I think I started to believe my heart was pounding that bad, or maybe my actual heart fell into some kind of sympathetic rhythm.

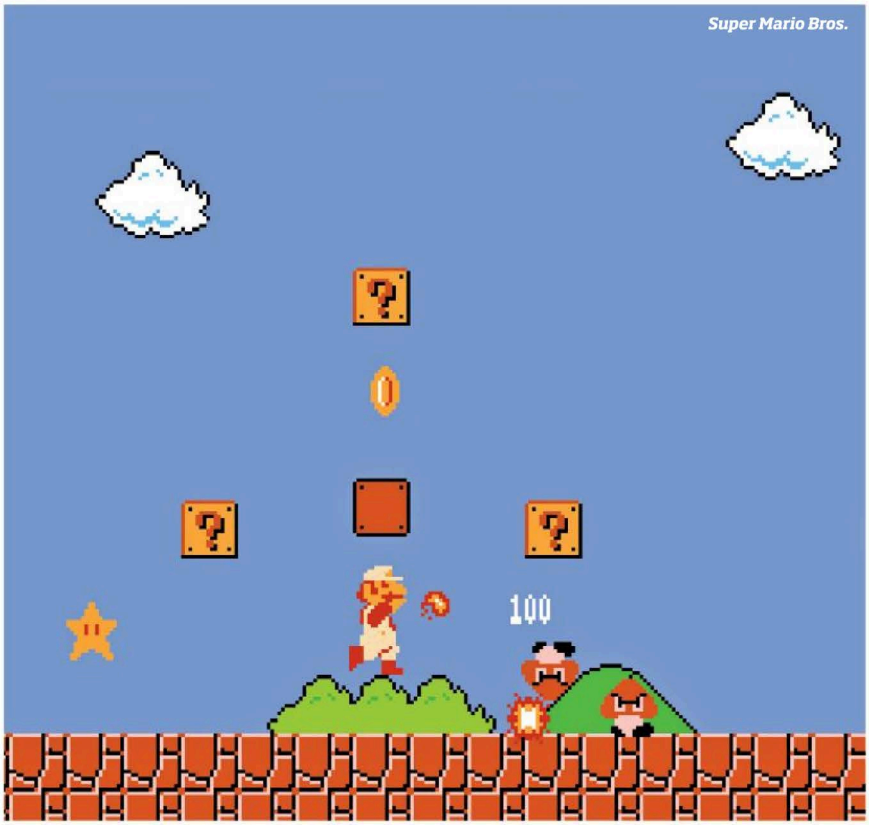
A friend of mine was watching and we were both sitting in total silence, the static from Harry Mason's little radio squawking whenever I advanced in the direction I needed to go. Every time I caught a glimpse of something, I'd run back the way I came — or die. [With] that heartbeat pounding the whole time. I swear it went on for hours like that. Then suddenly I just snapped and threw the controller to my friend: "I can't take this anymore. You find the $%&!#@ way out of here!"

The fact that a game could have that strong of a psychological and physiological effect was pretty astounding to me at the time. **— Brian Hayes, creative director, EA (*UFC*)**

> "Every time I caught a glimpse of something, I'd run back the way I came – or die. [With] that heartbeat pounding the whole time. I swear it went on for hours like that. Then suddenly I just snapped and threw the controller to my friend: "I can't take this anymore. You find the $%&!#@ way out of here!"

7 ***DOOM***! It was so many of my firsts — my first FPS, my first co-op game experience, and the first time I actually understood that you could have a job in games after I got in on the beta through a tester who was working on it. I'd start playing at the office with my co-workers at six, and we wouldn't go home until 2am every night! **— Kiki Wolfkill, exec producer, 343 (*Halo* franchise)**

8 **PLAYING** *Full Throttle* and realizing that computer games were not just about space ships, knights in armor, and plumbers — but [that they] could focus on something important, like rock 'n' roll and motorcycles. **— Mikkel Martin Pedersen, lead designer, Press Play (*Max: The Curse of Brotherhood*)**



Super Mario Bros.

"I was 5 when *Super Mario Bros.* came out and at 30 years old – I'm *still* drawing levels for it."

9 **THE FIRST** *Super Mario Bros.*, with its blue skies and green hills, was completely amazing to me. I *had to have* an NES after I played it at my neighbor's house. My parents gave in to the whining soon enough and bought me a...PC. After a year of *Prince of Persia* and *CD-Man*, I finally got an NES and started drawing my own *Mario* levels in a notebook. I was about 5 when *Mario Bros.* came out and at 30 years old — I'm *still* drawing levels for it. **— Karri Kiviluoma, lead designer, RedLynx (*Trials Fusion*)**

10 **I COULD** certainly come up with an elaborate story of how I discovered videogames, but in truth I was 7, I played *Super Mario Bros.* for the first time, discovered the secret 1-up mushroom in World 1-1, and my dream of being an astronaut was forever lost to the mists of childhood fantasies.

Games have a powerful hold over me, both as a fan and as a professional. No matter how much I play or how much I work, my appetite is never fulfilled. The games industry is an incredible thing to be a part of, and let's be honest...I'd never make it as a banker. **— Eric Studer, senior design producer, Airtight Games (*Murdered: Soul Suspect*)**

11 **IN THE SUMMER** of 1988, between eighth and ninth grade, I played two PC games that opened my eyes about the potential of videogames to deliver expansive and emotional experiences: *Planetfall* and *Starflight*. *Planetfall* was a text adventure, but in my imagination it created some of the most spectacular visual experiences I've had in any game to date. *Starflight* on the other hand was an open-world space exploration game that delivered a galaxy of countless planets to explore — on two 360k disks!

Both games gave you the ability to interact with memorable characters, where your choices would affect how they respond. In particular, *Planetfall* had a robot character, Floyd, who was so well implemented that he brought tears to my eyes in the dramatic climax of the story. In many ways, the *Mass Effect* series was my attempt at recapturing some of the magic I experienced in those two games. **— Casey Hudson, executive producer, BioWare (*Mass Effect* series)**

All About Lara

From raiding tombs to making games

ATARI 2600 and Commodore 64 games were a big part of my childhood. When I went to art school in 1991, games weren't really a part of my life — I felt I had outgrown them. In the summer of my senior year I went to DragonCon in Atlanta, and met an art director from Disney Interactive. I showed him my portfolio, which awarded me an interview and eventually my first job in [games].

From that point on I fell in love with games again, and I was able to contribute to the end of the 16-bit era and the birth of 3D games on PC, Nintendo 64, and PlayStation. *Doom* was the first game that opened my eyes to the potential of 3D, but *Super Mario 64* and *Tomb Raider* sealed the deal. I loved the feel of *Mario 64*, but the tone and character of Lara Croft showed me a glimpse of games as more than a kid's medium. The opportunity to work on the reimagining of *Tomb Raider* has been the highlight of my career. **— Brian Horton, senior art director, Crystal Dynamics (*Tomb Raider*)**

IN 1996-97 I was at a point in life that I had to decide what I was going to do at university. I was also at a point where I was infatuated with playing through [*Tomb Raider*], searching for any extra info on the game. I saw Toby Gard talking on TV about the creative process of making [*Tomb Raider*] and the penny dropped: "People actually work [and] have jobs creating games. Maybe I could do something like that, too." **— Oskari Häkkinen, head of franchise development, Remedy (*Alan Wake*, *Quantum Break*)**

12 **IN 1982** I was in Las Vegas for a ski industry show to help purchase next season's inventory for my employer, a specialty ski shop in Ann Arbor, MI. I elected to invest in a roll of quarters for the arcade in one of the casinos instead of the blackjack tables. My fascination with videogames started in 1974 with Atari's *TANK*, but on that fateful night in Vegas, it was Ed Logg's *Centipede* that provided the epiphany — people were earning a living making videogames and I wanted in.

My used Apple II fed my passion for games and humbled my aspirations to be a brilliant programmer. The Ann Arbor computer hobbyist community answered my never-ending questions and introduced me to my business partner for my first game development company in 1984. It's funny; even after all these years I feel as privileged developing *World of Tanks* for the Xbox today as I did working on *Spiderbot* and *Impossible Mission* for Epyx in the mid-'80s. **— Denny Thorley, head of Wargaming's Chicago studio (*World of Tanks*), formerly Day One Studios (*MechAssault* series)**

13 **FOR ME**, it was playing an early version of a text adventure at my house, hooked up to a main frame by modem and heat-sensitive dot-matrix printer. I saw the words "You are standing in an open field west of a white house..." and fell in love. It wasn't called *Zork* yet, but it was so much cooler than *Pong*.

I was still in college, but I knew that at some point I wanted to be part of something that could make that kind of interactive entertainment even better. It took another 15 years or so before I experienced the beta version of *Myst*. The moment I saw and heard that game, I realized that I needed to switch from doing music and sound for TV and film and figure out how to get into the game business. **— Marty O'Donnell, audio director, Bungie**

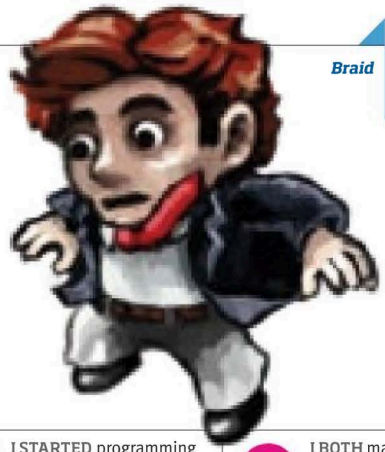
14 **THERE ARE** actually three specific moments that hit me as a gamer, each influencing my eventual decision to become a developer.

The first was when a friend brought over his shiny new console from some nobodies calling themselves Nintendo, and this crazy game called *Super Mario Bros*. As a 2600/Intellivision kid it was like peering into the future. But what really got me was when I first saw Mario climb a vine into the clouds. My friend let the moment soak in, and I just stared, dumbstruck. A grown man had just climbed a vine and was now standing on a cloud. It was at that moment that I discovered the magic of [games] had expanded into a realm only previously occupied by books and film.

The second moment came years later, from my favorite videogame for my favorite console. *Ys Book 1 & 2* was the first CD-based game I owned on my TurboGrafx-16 CD system, and I was simply blown away by the use of Red Book audio, voice, and full-screen cinematics. It's quaint by today's standards, but that level of storytelling and immersion has influenced pretty much everything I make, gaming or not.

The third came during this last generation, with Jonathan Blow's *Braid*. First, it was a downloadable game on a scale unlike any I had ever seen. Second, it presented 2D visuals in a way that I had always dreamed, but no one was doing. Third, the mechanics, storytelling, and jaw-dropping finale convinced me that an amazing experience could come from a single, focused mind.

That was it. After *OXM* sparked my interest in programming with XNA, I finally decided I was tired of being an armchair developer, and I was just going to do it myself. Several years of backbreaking work later, I finally fulfilled that dream. But I can still see those influences in my work, and I feel privileged to have stood on the backs of giants. **— Dean Dodrill, game developer, Humble Hearts (*Dust: An Elysian Tail*)**



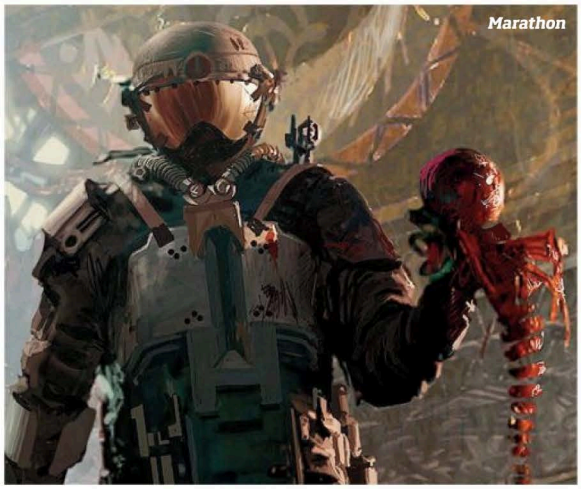
Braid

15 **I STARTED** programming when I was 11 on a friend's ZX Spectrum 48k, and naturally the first thing I wanted to do was to make a game. But it wasn't until later when I played *Another World* (*Out of This World* in North America) on my Amiga 500 that I knew that making games was my calling!

The animation and atmosphere in that game blew me away. And when I read a story that Eric Chahi did programming, art, and design himself, something clicked for me. I always strive to recapture that moment of wonder in the games I work on. **— Saxs Persson, studio manager, Team Dakota (*Project Spark*)**

16 **I BOTH** made and played games all throughout my childhood, from writing my own *Lunar Lander* to painstakingly copying maps of *System Shock*'s Citadel Station on graph paper. But it was being part of a game community for the first time that hooked me — playing *Marathon* illicitly at night in the basement of the Computer Science department.

That magical combination of a great game with an immersive social element was something I'd never experienced before, and I knew I wanted to help bring that experience to more people. **— Chris Butcher, senior engineering lead, Bungie**



Marathon

"On that fateful night in Vegas, it was Ed Logg's *Centipede* that provided the epiphany – people were earning a living making videogames and I wanted in."

Wipeout

17 **[THE ATARI 2600]** was our first game console and we played it endlessly; I was the only kid on my block who could finish *Pitfall 2*. I followed that up with thousands of hours invested into the NES, Sega Genesis, Super Nintendo, Commodore Amiga, and the PC. Years later, I had just graduated college when the Sony PlayStation first came out. This was really the first time we were seeing full 3D games (*Wipeout*, *Warhawk*, *Air Combat*, etc.) and then I saw the potential for where things were headed. In that moment, I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I wanted to be a game designer. **— Rex Dickson, creative director – core football gameplay, EA Tiburon (*Madden NFL 25, NCAA Football 14*)**

18 **I KNEW** when I finally graduated from college I wanted to make games, but it still seemed so unlikely, so remote and impenetrable as a trade. How do people get those jobs? It was a mystery.

At the time I was working in the new-media industry, still longing to work in games, sort of milling around the periphery, unsure how to break in. I had been playing a lot of *Diablo II*, which I loved. Then, I was home sick for about two weeks, and picked up *Planescape: Torment*. The only thing I remember of those two weeks was occupying that world. When I finished the game I sent Chris Avellone — the game's lead designer at Obsidian and a great guy— an e-mail, telling him how affecting and inspiring the game was to me, personally. Avellone, being a great guy, wrote back. The combination of Chris' kindness and my love for the game basically made me quit the new-media industry and push into games for real. Thanks, Chris. **— David Goldfarb, game director, Overkill (*Payday 2*)**

"We still laugh when recalling *that* scene – our mom rushed down the stairs to find out why all three of her children were sobbing in unison."

Final Fantasy VII

19 **I WISH** I could say the pursuit of my career was triggered by hacky sack in *California Games* and countless sorcery battles in *Archon* — but it wasn't. Instead, I realized making games was not only possible, but perhaps even forward-thinking, after reading Daniel Pink's *A Whole New Mind*, a fabulously-written book that posits the future of the global workforce belongs to right-brainers (creative thinkers). He called out several videogame development institutions, including Carnegie Mellon's Entertainment Technology Center, which is where I ended up before Firaxis.

If you're interested in making games, give *A Whole New Mind* to your mom and dad; they may lay off and realize your hobby could blossom into a unique and fulfilling career path. **— Garth DeAngelis, senior producer, Firaxis (*XCOM: Enemy Unknown*)**

20 **I WAS ONLY** twelve when my brothers and I visited Midgar. As our first foray into *Final Fantasy VII*, we didn't know what to expect. To say it moved us is an understatement. The deep and challenging gameplay, married with stunning graphics, a surprisingly mature narrative, and haunting music was enough to establish it as one of our defining childhood memories. We still laugh when recalling *that* scene — our mom rushed down the stairs to find out why all three of her children were sobbing in unison.

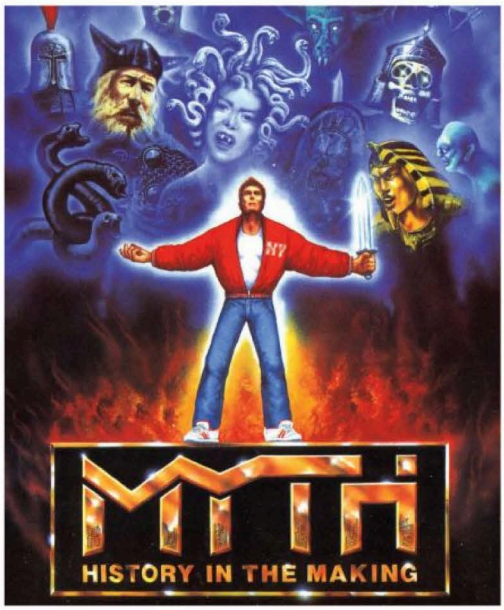
Videogames have the capacity to deliver narrative and encourage ownership in a way no other form of media can. And I knew I wanted to be a part of that change. **— Meagan Marie, community and communication manager, Crystal Dynamics**

Planescape: Torment

The Creative Process

Cause-and-effect in creating games sparked some devs' imaginations

THE MOMENT for me was suddenly realizing I had enough programming knowledge and understanding of Flash that I could actually make a game, something I'd always wanted to do. Programming A.I. into sprites was super exciting. I felt like I'd discovered a tool to make anything, given enough time. There was still so much I needed to learn, though. I decided entering the industry would expose me to a lot of it and headed in. **— Jason Dreger, designer, Klei (*Mark of the Ninja*, *Incognita*)**



I STARTED off building multiplayer maps for local games of *Warcraft II* and *Marathon* before internet access was available in my home town, but it was getting involved in the online community around *Myth* that opened the possibility of making games professionally. Creating experiences that bring creativity and camaraderie out of total strangers is a constant high. **— Tyson Green, investment design lead, Bungie (*Destiny*)**

[THE START for me] came from entering code into a computer, and making a game appear magically on the screen. Frankly, it was maybe more magic than designing a game, since it takes a [special] formula, and then suddenly from that, you launch a game... but most of the time, you miss some part of the code and nothing appears. [laughs] **— Michel Ancel, Director, Ubisoft Montpellier (*Rayman* series, *Beyond Good & Evil* series)**

I WAS already playing games on my Atari 2600, Intellivision, and eventually on my Commodore 64. So I liked games, but it wasn't until the first time on my C64 when I programmed a hot-air balloon to move across the TV screen that I thought: "I want to do this for real." It was that feeling of seeing something I created being played back that hooked me and still gets me. **— Chet Faliszek, writer, Valve (*Left 4 Dead* series)**

21 **I REMEMBER** downloading the shareware version of *Doom* on my dad's MS-DOS PC. From the second that I dropped into the first level (E1M1: Hangar), I was hooked. I spent hours playing through the entire first episode, over and over, and then bought the full game. At the time [in the early '90s], I played games on my Amiga computer and my SNES, but after discovering *Doom* I sold them both to get enough money to build a full-on gaming PC, so that I could play the game in full screen and with top-notch audio.

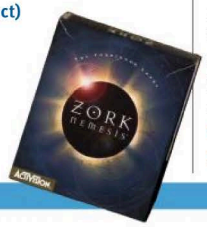
Doom was the game that got me into PC gaming, introduced me to the FPS genre, helped me discover competitive multiplayer, and inspired me to start using an editor to build my own levels. **— Josh Holmes, Studio Creative Director, 343 Industries (*Halo* franchise)**

22 **I HAVE** this vivid memory of being mesmerized while the smoke hung above a circuit board as my Dad steadied a soldering iron. He was creating arcade hardware for the Russian puzzle/shooter game *Gorodki* when I was about 4 years old, and I was utterly fascinated.

Flash forward to a darkened theater in LA where hundreds of us were packed elbow-to-elbow, waiting to see the year's most impressive visual achievements at Siggraph's Electronic Theater. The memory of me as a fascinated 4-year-old suddenly came rushing back as the colors, graphics, and musical score of a *Halo 3* cinematic came screaming out of the darkness. I knew then that I wanted to create something just as powerful and engaging — I wanted to make games. **— Natasha Tatarchuk, engineering architect, Bungie**

> "*Zork Nemesis* is where I fell in love with the idea of a fantastic, living world I could explore and interact with... years later, standing on the moon in *Mass Effect*, looking up at the Earth, I decided that I didn't just want to explore these worlds: I wanted to make them."

23 **THE FIRST** game I bought for myself was *Zork: Nemesis*. I'd played other titles, but *Nemesis* is where I fell in love with the idea of a fantastic, living world I could explore and interact with. The clinching moment came years later, standing on the moon in *Mass Effect*, looking up at the Earth. I decided that I didn't just want to explore these worlds: I wanted to make them. **— Jo Berry, writer, BioWare Montreal (*Mass Effect* project)**

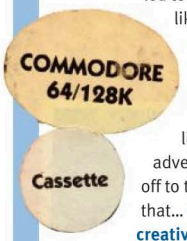


24 **I ALWAYS** had a passion for sports games, and the game I loved most was *NHL 94*. I played so much my first two years of college that I barely survived. I was in art school around 1997 when I first realized what I wanted to do the rest of my life.

Home computers just started to be cheap enough and commonplace enough that students like myself could afford 3D programs and Photoshop. It also coincided with the launch of [the first] PlayStation. When I played *Resident Evil* I was so inspired, I realized that my passion for art and games could actually be a career. **— Mike Young, creative director, EA Tiburon (*Madden NFL 25*)**

25 **IT STARTED** a bit with Logo... a little coordinate program that they would bring into your elementary school where you would type in x/y coordinates and then a little turtle would move on the screen. They also had a robot that would follow those commands, so that was the first time my brain went, "Oh my God, I can make computers do things."

I then cried and cried and cried [for] my parents to get me a Commodore 64, and on it there was a Sid Meier game, but not the one that anyone would think of — it's not *Pirates!*, it's not *[Civilization]* — it was MicroProse's *Gunship*. Flying that little virtual, not-even-3D helicopter, I decided, "I totally want to make games." And so that led to learning things like Basic, aping programming magazines at the time, and building out little text-based adventures. It was off to the races from that... **— Morgan Gray, creative director, 2K Marin**



26 **THERE WAS** a want ad in a games magazine I just so happened to look through at the bookstore. I saw the words "Staff Wanted" subtly stand out in the middle of a blank, white page. I never had any knowledge or experience in the gaming industry, but instinctively thought to myself that "I should apply for this"...

However, now that I look back on this — "simple lettering on a white background" is very similar to the design scheme for a traditional *Final Fantasy* package design (for the Japanese version). And I'm sure there must've been a sort of design sensibility in the want ad that drew people in as well.

After deciding to put in an application, I played *Final Fantasy I* through *III*. (I'm going to be honest and say that I'd never played the series before making this decision!) I remember seeing *Final Fantasy* bring a dramatic presentation using only two-dimensional pictures, and feeling that this game had great potential as a means for dramatic expression in the future. **— Yoshinori Kitase, producer, 1st Production Department, Square Enix (*Lightning Returns: FF XIII*)**

27 **I WAS FAIRLY** young when I first played through *Phantasy Star* for the Sega Master System, but it changed my perspective on videogames forever. The developers had created a science-fiction world that was so rich and detailed, you wanted to live there and be part of it. From then on, I wanted to be a part of creating something as fantastic and inspiring as that. **— Mike Gamble, producer, BioWare (*Mass Effect* series)**

28 **BUNGIE'S *MYTH: The Fallen Lords*** came out right when I was considering a big career change, from something cut-and-dry to something much more creative. I'd played games all my life, but *Myth*'s potent mix of visceral combat, great community support, and terrific story and world-building hooked me — it convinced me to stop just playing games and try my hand at making them. I've been at Bungie ever since. **— Joseph Staten, design director and lead writer, Bungie**

"[The *Phantasy Star* developers] created a science-fiction world that was so rich and detailed, you wanted to live there and be part of it. From then on, I wanted to be a part of creating something as fantastic and inspiring as that."

The Write Path

The pen is as mighty as the pixel

I'D LOVED games all my life, since my dad brought home the Odyssey, but it never occurred to me that I could actually get paid to make them. Maybe because the homemade games I would try to make on my Atari 400 were so bad, when they actually got finished. I thought I was going to be a writer, but then I saw the job listing for LucasFilm Games, so I took a detour after college. Except now here I am, getting paid to write! Well, except this. I'm not getting paid to write this. **— Tim Schafer, president and CEO, Double Fine**

FOR THE LONGEST time, I figured I couldn't write games for a living because it wasn't a "serious" job. Instead I went into journalism and wrote about serious things like politics and religion. But [one of my] professors could tell my heart wasn't in it. He said that I had to write about something I loved next time. I thought for sure he'd fail me when I turned in an assignment about videogames. But he loved it and asked, "Now why didn't you write this in the first place?" That's when I realized it wasn't a matter of impressing anyone — I should just write what I loved. **— Meghan Watt, writer and designer, Ubisoft Massive (*Far Cry 3, Tom Clancy's The Division*)**

29 **1987 FLIPPED** a switch for me...I can't tell you how many hours I gleefully wasted in my basement playing the "new" line of sports games that started to appear on the NES that year. *RBI Baseball*, *Double Dribble*, and *Mike Tyson's Punch Out!!* all hit within a few months of one another. Like everyone else, I had the early systems — Commodore 64, Atari, etc. — that did a great job with arcade games, but for some reason never really nailed sports for me. That lineup for the NES, followed shortly after by *Blades of Steel* and *Tecmo Bowl*, completely changed how I viewed gaming and the industry. **— Dave McCarthy, General Manager, Microsoft Studios (*Project Spark*)**

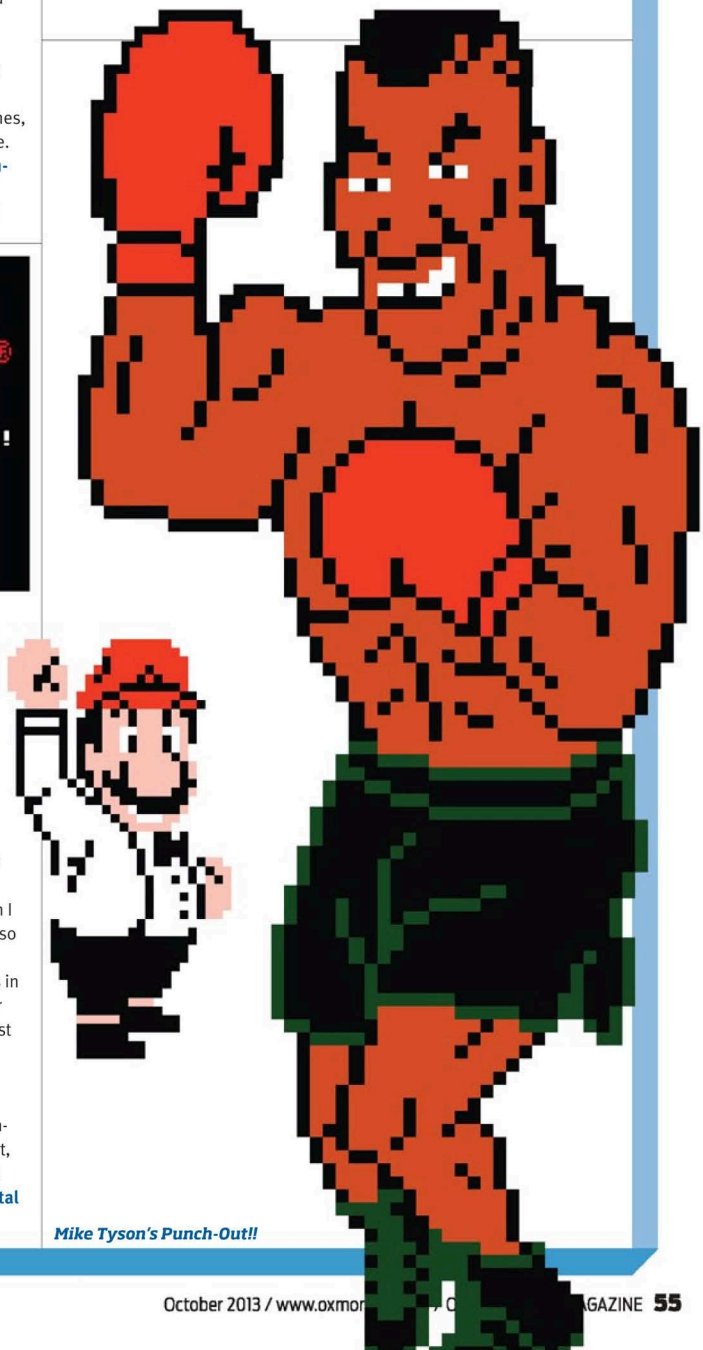
31 **MY EARLIEST** gaming memory was watching my brother and the neighborhood kids play *K.C. Munchkin!* on the Odyssey 2. I always knew I wanted to be the one making the games. I have really positive memories of playing *Double Dragon* in the arcade and playing *Rampage* with my brother and father on the boardwalk one summer. I loved going to the arcade because the games were cutting-edge and you never knew what new amazing [find] would be there when you went. My style is heavily influenced by arcade action games, as well as everything by Treasure. **— Tom Fulp, co-owner/programmer, The Behemoth (*Castle Crashers*, *Battleblock Theater*)**

"My earliest gaming memory was watching my brother and the neighborhood kids play *K.C. Munchkin!* on the Odyssey 2."

30 **THE MOMENT** for me happened in the middle of a school night in fourth grade. I'd been playing tons of this fancy new game (it had graphics!) called *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord* and for weeks I'd been stuck on one particular fight. I'd tried every party combination, every attack order, and died so many times that I'd lost count. But that night I woke up and knew exactly what to do. I snuck downstairs in my house, fired up the PC, crashed down in the dungeon and put an absolute whipping on the vampire elves or whatever had been laughing at me for so long. I'll always remember how good it felt to finally overcome the huge challenge the game created for me, and since then I can't get enough of the sense of "I did it!" that games can inspire. **— Kevin Grace, franchise manager, 343 Industries (*Halo* franchise)**

32 **IT WAS** the one-two punch of *Mario* and *Zelda* on the NES that had the biggest impact on me; I played every inch of those games. Although it was years before I'd look at game design as a career path, even then I was soaking up Miyamoto's beliefs about what a fun game should be. I would learn without knowing it, be tested without hating it, and feel powerful when I mastered it. [Those games were so full of] patterns to learn and rhythms to feel, but I was always in control, and always rewarded for my efforts. Those games were just plain fun.

Even as our games become wrapped in heavier stories with richer emotion and greater meaning, I never forget that at its heart, a game wants to be fun. **— Noah Hughes, creative director, Crystal Dynamics (*Tomb Raider*)**



Mike Tyson's Punch-Out!!

A to Zed

With its open-world gameplay and zombie-apocalypse setting, Undead Labs' **State of Decay** quickly nabbed 700,000 paid downloads in just a handful of weeks after its release. We chatted with the indie studio's head zed-in-charge, Jeff Strain, and the Undead Labs* team to solve some of the game's lingering mysteries – for instance, just how many different ways ***can*** you say "I got you a pony" during an undead invasion?

By Francesca Reyes & Edwin Evans-Thirlwell

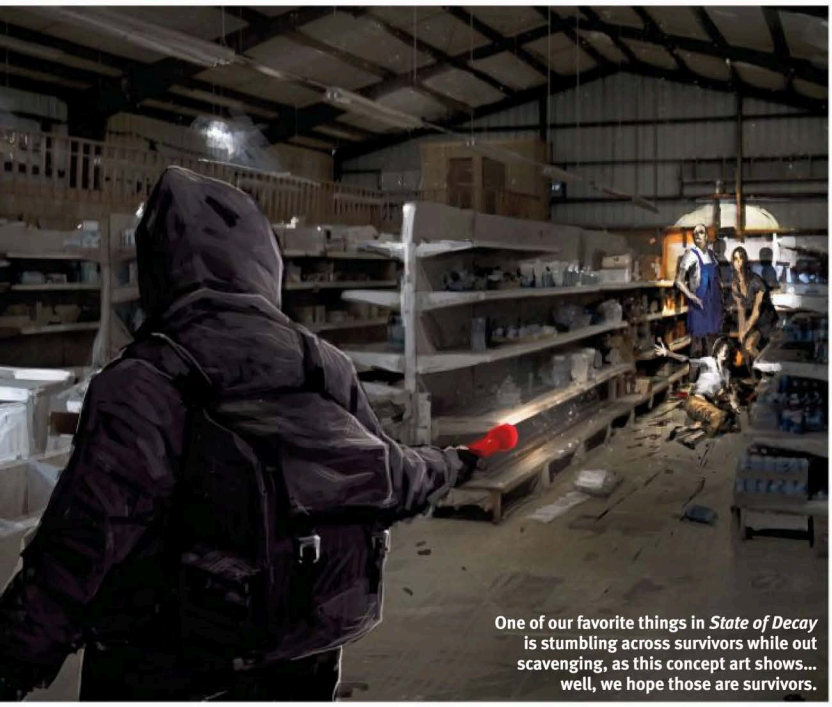
OXM: How'd you settle on Marcus being the game's initial playable survivor?
Jeff Strain: He's just a regular dude. He's not a badass, but he's also not a delicate snowflake. He's not a hero, or a thug, or a genius. He's not even particularly cool. He's just an ordinary guy who wanted to catch some fish on his week off. In the zombie apocalypse, it won't be the jocks, business tycoons, and hipsters that survive — it'll be average, ordinary people like Marcus. We wanted to set that tone right from the start.

OXM: Who wrote the stories for each of the survivors? With skills like "sexting" and "sports trivia," how did you settle on each of their different abilities?
Jeff: That was our writer and our creative director working as a team. We wanted the skills to reflect reality, in that not every modern skill will be useful in a survival situation. If the apocalypse started five minutes from now, you wouldn't have time to bone up on first aid or edible mushrooms or how to make a snare out of saplings and vines. You are who you are and you know what you know. Everyone has something to contribute... just some more so than others. And that's what we were going for with our characters.

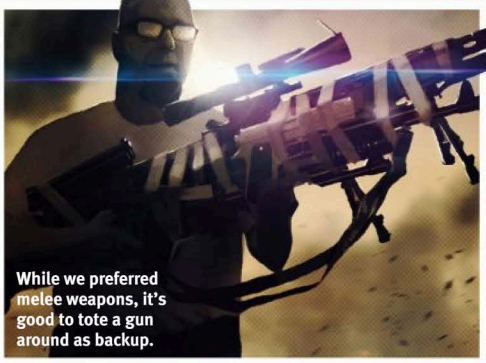
OXM: Any favorite survivors among the team? Any funny stories that went into creating specific ones?
Jeff: Everyone likes Ed, of course. Anyone who's seen the movie *Aliens* will certainly know the inspiration for his character. Marcus is also a favorite — I'm sure some of that has to do with the fact that you never feel like taking him out and shooting him after 20 hours of playing. He's the kind of guy you'd like to have on your side during the apocalypse, because he never gets on your nerves.

As for my personal favorite, I'm going to cheat

***NOTE:** This interview was conducted via email; answers attributed to "Undead Labs" were responses from multiple people on the team. They asked to be credited as a whole.*



One of our favorite things in *State of Decay* is stumbling across survivors while out scavenging, as this concept art shows... well, we hope those are survivors.



While we preferred melee weapons, it's good to tote a gun around as backup.

This image of Judge Lawton (from beta testing of the game) left an impression on Undead Lab's Jeff Strain.

a bit. During beta I was testing our character-generation system and cycling through all the models in the game, which included both playable and non-playable characters. Suddenly the model for Judge Constance Lawton cycled in, and I just froze. Judge Lawton is not a playable character in the game, and frankly she's not very likeable during the events of *State of Decay*. But seeing that character standing on the bleachers holding an AK and ready to absolutely lay it down to keep herself and her people alive just really struck me. [This] game isn't about heroes — it's about previously average people who've found the guts and grit to stay alive and start pushing back. This picture says it all [shown above lower-right].

OXM: With so many survivors and characters in the game, was each one completely personalized and created by the team — or were they created with a type of "randomizer" that crafts them out of assorted stats, models, and so on?
Jeff: The "storyline" characters — anyone with a role to play in the story before becoming someone you can play — are all lovingly hand-crafted to give you a good mix of skills and personalities in your community. Marcus is also handmade, since he's your starting guy. Everyone else is procedurally generated from a collection of models, first and last names, and sets of traits and abilities.

OXM: So, does that mean two people can be playing the game and not see some of the same survivors in their playthroughs?
Jeff: The storyline characters are the same from game to game, but since we procedurally generate most survivors, it's likely each game will have a different set. With that said, there are a finite number of character models and appearances, so you might see what appears to be the same people, but under the skin they'll have different names, skills, and traits.

OXM: What were some of the initial gameplay and world concepts you started out with, and how do they compare to what you ended up releasing? Were there any ideas you had to scrap for time or space?
Jeff: Some of the features we'd hoped to include in the initial release were swimming, bows and crossbows, proper fuel consumption, and hunting. In some cases these features didn't make it in because we didn't have time to implement them properly, and we didn't want to cram in a half-assed implementation just so we could say we had it. More often the issue was memory or hard drive space — we were already pushing hard against the limits of the Xbox 360 hardware and XBLA drive space limitations.

We'd also planned to offer cooperative multiplayer, via split-screen and network. During development it became clear we'd have to rewrite substantial portions of our game engine — which was designed as an FPS engine — to support those features, so we had to make the hard decision to drop multiplayer.

But gameplay-wise, the game is remarkably close to the original design. We envisioned a game that was about choices and consequences, rather than scripted events, and we feel we largely accomplished that.

OXM: There's a lot of diversity in each survivor's story and in the ethnic/gender/sexual orientation make up of the cast of characters. Was this a conscious effort on the part of the team? Or did it come about more organically?
Jeff: Diversity isn't something we had to create — it's simply something we wanted to reflect. We wanted you to feel like the zombie apocalypse could really happen in your hometown. The world is just not a homogenous place. Particularly in a world where all the cultural and societal structures have collapsed, and everyone is thrown together to survive — or not — the usual definitions of ethnicity, gender, or nationality are irrelevant. You're either alive and one of us, or you're dead and one of them.

OXM: Is it possible to survive the game if all the survivors leave your safe house — or die — and you take on the final mission alone? Can that happen?
Jeff: We've learned to never say never to gamers. While we didn't test it or plan for it, anything players can do in a virtual

What's the real story behind that unexplained downed plane in *State of Decay*? Undead Labs' played coy when we asked, which has us *very* curious...

world usually happens eventually. You can't lose Lily, though. (smiles)

OXM: Why did you decide to include the persistent world simulation? Would you do it differently now?
Jeff: The game reacts and changes according to the decisions you make. Some results are immediate, and others take time to come to fruition. A simulation requires both elements. Also, the sense that your actions matter, that your behavior has an enormous amount of impact on the world, but at the same time you cannot control luck or fate or how other people feel? That's the heart of the game. The [sensation] simply wouldn't exist if you could just save and continue. It would be like every other game.

Because the offline simulation slows dramatically the longer you're offline (the drop-off between two and three days off is sharp, and there's barely any difference between a week, a month, and a year), it's still viable for people who can't play every day.

We have modified the offline simulation since the release of the game so that you don't continue to burn resources while not playing. The simulation will still continue to progress build queues and drive world events, however, so you'll definitely perceive the passage of time when you log back in.

OXM: What do you think permadeath adds to the game experience? Did you ever think of not including it?
Jeff: Never. It's the absolute heart of a true survival game. [Take what I said above about] how much your decisions matter, the lack of total control, and fate. Now add to it the emotional attachment people form to their avatars. How can you mourn a loss that is one reload away from never happening? How meaningful is picking up the pieces when every loss comes with a do-over?

There've been a number of thoughtful reviews that say this is one of the most emotionally resonant aspects of the game. Normally, the emotional angle comes from the story the game is telling you. In our case, *you* are the story. When someone dies, you carry on.

OXM: What are some of the more amusing stories that you've heard from players once the game released? How do they compare to the stories from team members playing through the game pre-release?
Jeff: Our producer, Jess, noted that because we were testing while we played, we had a real no-holds-barred attitude while we played... until we got closer to release, and started playing as players. We got to experience the panic when the ferals came out of nowhere, or when our lovingly built communities started to spiral out of control.

"You're either alive and one of us, or you're dead and one of them."

We of course didn't try everything. For example, we knew we hadn't been able to implement the ability to toss a backpack into the bed of a truck, so we didn't even bother trying it. We were secretly delighted when our community figured out that if you drive at the speed of melting glass and line things up just right, you can kind of sort of manage it. It's that kind of ingenuity that makes us want to build more sandbox features. I mean, if people can do that with no support or even intention on our part, imagine what could be done with some proper systems.

In general, we've watched and enjoyed just about every player-made playthrough online. The unrehearsed reactions to losing a survivor... well, it's everything we hoped for.

The community has a "funny things" thread going on the forum, and we've been enjoying watching people find all the easter eggs we hid. The other thing that gets us laughing in pure delight is seeing funny timing. The game is *system-*

UNDEAD FASHION: The image of the *State of Decay* t-shirt–wearing zombie to the left is actually an illustration showing off custom gear available to purchase through Undead Lab's site: http://bit.ly/170kSgL.

Our advice: drive the "Modern Pickup" vehicles only when necessary. They're excellent as tanks, but they're somewhat rare.

heavy, not *script*-heavy, so we couldn't possibly plan the setup/punch-line comedy that happens. For instance, someone was telling us on Twitter about a time where one of the random vocal lines came on, something [like], "When are you going to need that much toilet paper?", *just* as three hordes appeared on the map.

OXM: We were impressed by the quality of the voice acting in the game. What was the goal in the recording sessions?
Jeff: We decided to keep all of the voice recording in Seattle. Our main focus during the casting process was to find actors that could deliver their lines naturally while still keeping the intensity required for a post-apocalyptic world. Surprisingly, several of these roles were filled with individuals who had never acted in a videogame before. With their experience performing on the stage, however, we were able to get great performances, which really brought the game to life.

While we had several actors perform smaller side roles, the majority of the voice-over work revolved around creating six playable voice types. Each of these actors voiced a main character in the game (Sam, Maya, Marcus, Ed, Alan, and Judge Lawton) but also had to record thousands of lines to handle the vast range of dialogue needed for generic missions and impromptu responses. Our writer created alternate variations of lines as often as he could so that each voice would respond to similar situations with varied attitudes and performances, as well as different lines, to keep things fresh. We also implemented a system that would pitch these random characters higher and lower than the original performance in real time to increase the variation of voices throughout *State of Decay*.

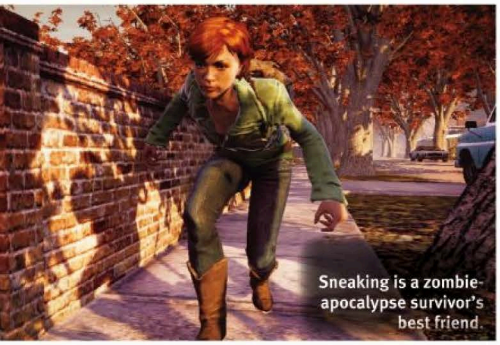
OXM: Any fun stories about recording the zombie voices? Like, who did the voices for the Big 'Uns and Screamers?
Jeff: Our audio director Kevin voiced the majority of the male zombies for *State of Decay* including the screamer, Big 'Un, feral, and bloater. The goal for the freaks was to keep them sounding similar enough to the generic zombie that each vocal felt like it came from the same source of the zombie breakout. At the same time, each of the freaks had to be distinct enough to hear from a distance and let the player know when a threat was near.

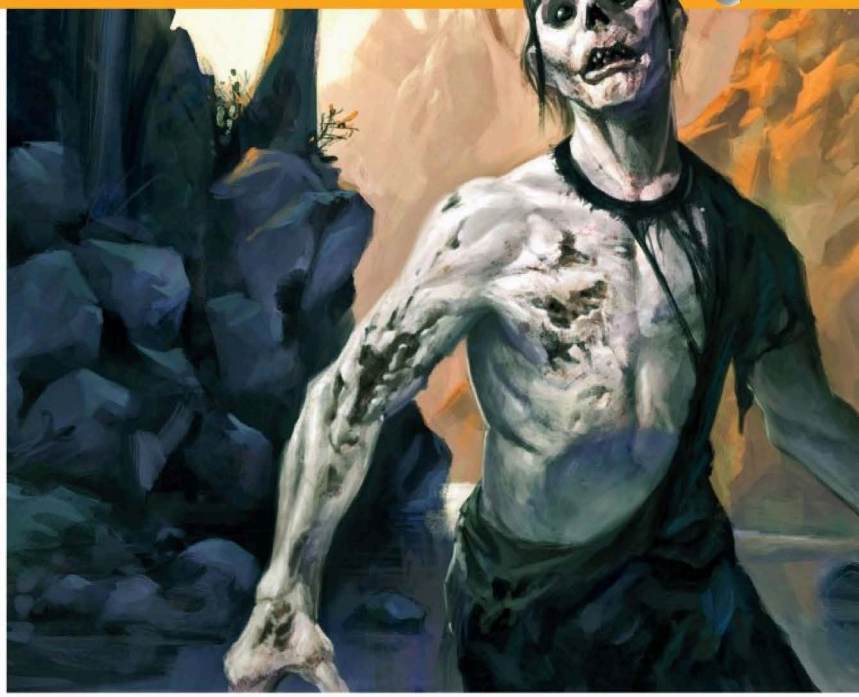
The screamer might be the furthest from a cohesive zombie "sound," but we really wanted players to reel from the cry of the armless freak. We were inspired by the original 1970s pod people from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. By combining the sounds of human screams, squealing pigs, and howling horses, Kevin was able to put together the piercing, panicked sound of the screamer.

The sources of the other freaks are much more "human." The Big 'Un involved a lot of guttural yelling with heavy sound pitching, causing Kevin to lose his voice for two days. The feral was a combination of human vocals blended with panthers, leopards, and the like. The bloater was definitely the messiest of the bunch to create — [we used] yogurt as a large part of the rotted, decomposing vocals. That's right, *yogurt*.

OXM: Are there plans to expand the building and strategy aspects of the game further with future updates — perhaps giving people the opportunity to set up shelters wherever they please, rather than in certain buildings?
Undead Labs: Free-form building would be more than an update — very nearly an entire rewrite of the base building system as it exists in *State of Decay*! The underlying system depends on a set structure with available

Only take what's necessary when stocking up at your safehouse.


Sneaking is a zombie-apocalypse survivor's best friend.



nodes. One never knows what will be possible in future games, of course, but I think in *State of Decay*, buildings-where-you-please won't happen.

That said, it's certainly possible to add strategy elements to the game. The game is built on a sophisticated simulation engine — we call it FateEngine — that is used to drive game events by modeling a giant conflict of Humans vs. Zombies. It's similar to an RTS AI, in that it is designed to respond to player actions and changing world conditions. *State of Decay* makes good use of FateEngine to tell the story of the game and model [the] impact on you and your fellow survivors from the choices you make as you play, but we can (and will) do much more with the technology. Expect to see some additional strategy elements in the forthcoming sandbox mode, and potentially more additions with future updates.

OXM: How about formal, paid expansions? Could you add new areas and storylines to the mix?
UL: Anything's possible. But we just launched, and our focus right now is getting the Steam version out the door. As for a formal expansion, the thing we've announced is the pure sandbox mode. No storyline but the one you tell yourself as you try to survive.

OXM: Where is *State of Decay* supposed to take place, geographically?
Jeff: It's eastern Washington state, unofficially, but with that said, we tried to make it evocative of a lot of places. "Faded Americana" was the name we used for the style. The goal was familiarity; we wanted it to feel like a place you'd actually live.

OXM: How many total possible survivors are there in the game?
Jeff: Because we want players to be able to finish the storyline, the randomly generated [characters] aren't limited. The real limit is how many you can feed, house, and manage emotionally.

Can you find the last, elusive ones?

EASTER EGGS

We asked Undead Labs' head honcho Jeff Strain about the easter eggs in the game (which includes some particularly fun ones, like nods to Robert Kirkman), and if there were any that the Undead Labs team suspects no one's found yet. His response? "Our sharp eyed community has found most of them, but yeah, there are a few that no one's spotted. Be sure to take note of URLs you see on posters and billboards throughout the world." Hmm...

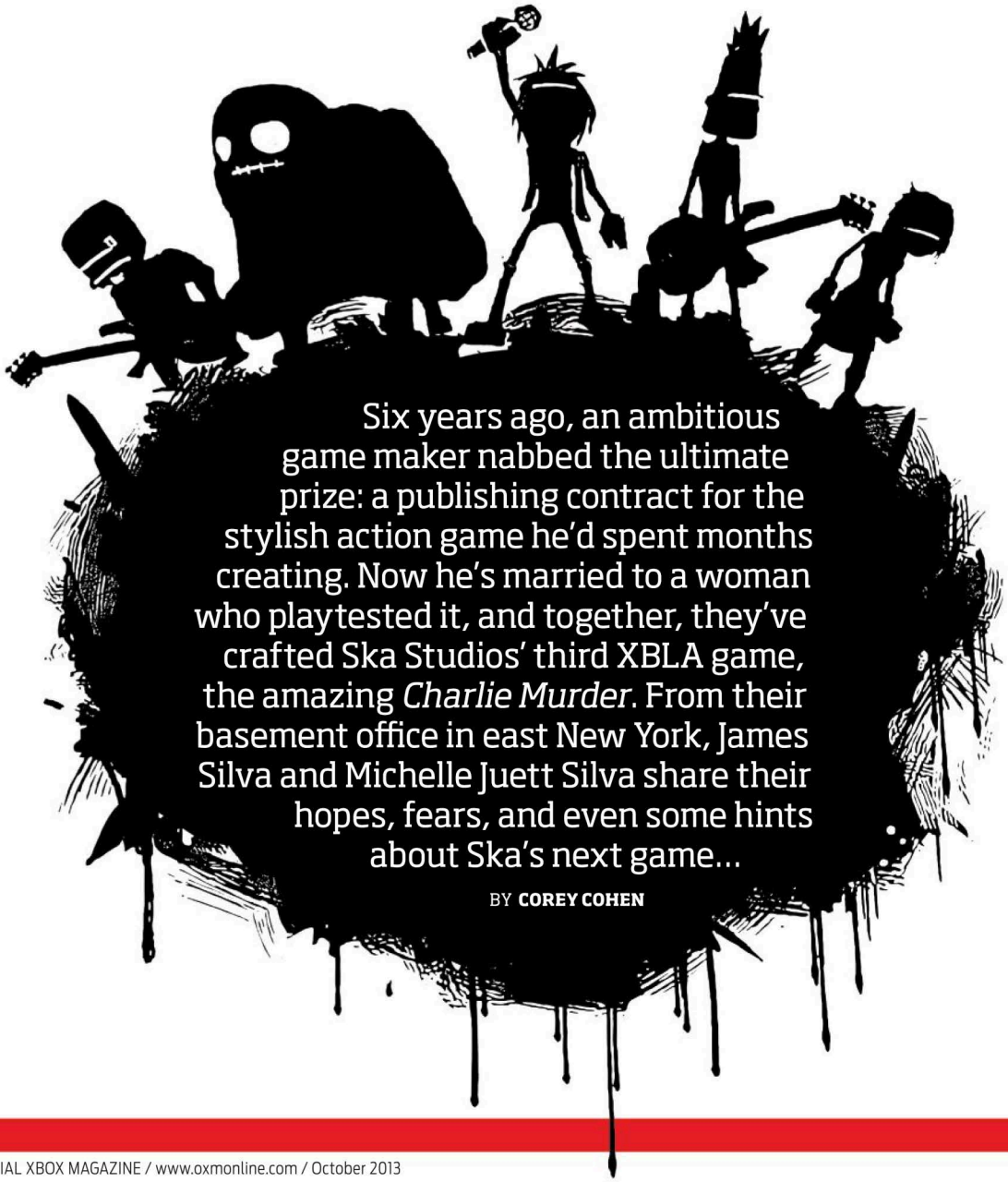
OXM: There are more zombie games now than ever before. How do you stop the idea of an undead apocalypse from getting stale?
UL: You don't worry about what everyone else is doing, and you build the game you always wanted to play. You don't stop to focus group and get approval before you try something new and possibly insane. Great games are made by passionate teams, and we were passionate about modeling the zombie-survival genre in a way that hadn't yet been attempted.

OXM: Are there any other game types or kinds of fiction you'd like to work on?
UL: We love the survival genre, in all forms. The themes of societal collapse, and human survivors from diverse backgrounds working together to overcome a common enemy and rebuild society has incredible and enduring potential for new game mechanics and compelling player-driven stories. It's this, more than the zombie apocalypse specifically, that drives our future game aspirations. That said, our hearts are very much with *State of Decay*, so all of this is squarely in the "someday" category.

OXM: How many variations on the "...I got you a pony" line are there in the game? We only experienced two — playing as Maya and Marcus — but are there others?
Jeff: There *are* others. (smiles) But there are fewer now, after the most recent Title Update. Something that seems funny on paper is sometimes annoying in practice, particularly when you've heard it a thousand times. We want you to laugh, cry, mourn, plan, and yawp in triumph. We'd rather you not throw the controller at the TV.

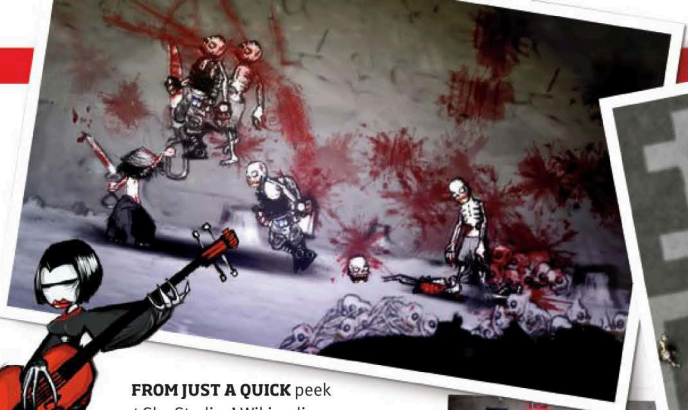
DECISIONS: We wondered how to divvy up our time between the game's differing morale missions — like clearing out infestations vs. cheering up a safe-house survivor. Strain suggests "there's truly not a right answer."

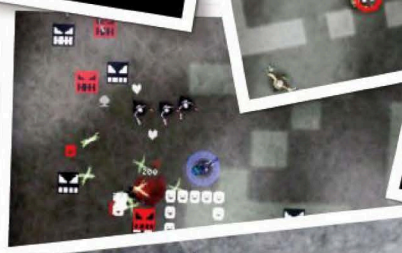
Murder Incorporated



Six years ago, an ambitious game maker nabbed the ultimate prize: a publishing contract for the stylish action game he'd spent months creating. Now he's married to a woman who playtested it, and together, they've crafted Ska Studios' third XBLA game, the amazing *Charlie Murder*. From their basement office in east New York, James Silva and Michelle Juett Silva share their hopes, fears, and even some hints about Ska's next game...

BY **COREY COHEN**





"I'm proud of how *I MAED A GAM3* became a cultural phenomenon in gaming...and I'm grateful for the recognition it's received," James tells us.

FROM JUST A QUICK peek at Ska Studios' Wikipedia page, it's clear: founder James Silva likes making action games. He followed up his first solo release — sidescroller *Zombies Smashers X* (2001) — with a few more PC-based indie games, but a career as a game designer was hardly a given. Only after he'd finished earning his computer-science degree and entered the working world did he get his first big break. His game *The Dishwasher: Dead Samurai* tied for first place in Microsoft's 2007 Dream-Build-Play game-creating contest, earning it a free spot on Xbox Live Arcade in 2009 once it was ready for prime time.

Flash forward to 2013, and *Dishwasher*'s done more than establish Ska Studios as a maker of hyperviolent, highly enjoyable 2D action games. It's also how James met his wife, Michelle, who was one of the game's bug testers. Today she's the other half of Ska Studios, producing art and handling PR for their games, starting with 2013 Summer of Arcade release *Charlie Murder* (see review, page 70).

During our nearly two-hour phone conversation with them, we were struck by their enthusiasm, their humility, and the way they finished each other's thoughts. Is that a byproduct of working together all day, every day? And what do they see in Ska's past, present, and future?

OXM On the origins of Ska Studios — James, you used XNA [Microsoft's freeware game-development toolset released in late 2006] to create *The Dishwasher: Dead Samurai* so you could enter it in Microsoft's 2007 Dream-Build-Play contest. What else were you doing at the time?

JAMES SILVA: The year I started *Dead Samurai* [2007], I was finishing up college. I submitted the game to Dream-Build-Play just as a long shot, and a month or so later, right out of college, I got a decent Java-programming desk job. I was doing contract work for the Air Force, [working on] their own version of Google Earth....But after a month or so I thought, "This is horrible." I was basically coming to accept that that would be the rest of my life: "Okay, here you are...The games thing was fun, but it didn't work out." Then, a few months into that job, I was invited to Gamefest and Microsoft announced that *Dishwasher* had won.

OXM How'd it feel to win Dream-Build-Play?

JS I couldn't believe it; I was just blown away. Super grateful, super happy. It took a while to wrap my head around it.

OXM How long had you spent creating that contest-winning version of *Dead Samurai*?

JS About four months on that prototype. Then it took another year and a half to get it [ready for XBLA release].

MICHELLE JUETT SILVA: Testing it was how I became aware of James and [his games]. What's funny is that when James was telling me the Dream-Build-Play story, he said he didn't know if his game was going to be accepted. But Microsoft flew him out to Gamefest. Why would they do that and then say, "You didn't win!"?

JS I still had this mentality back then that if your game wasn't 3D...it would never do that well.

OXM You actually tied for first place with David Flook, who'd made 2D badminton game *Blazing Birds*. It's interesting how your paths diverged after that: you've kept making progressively deeper 2D-action games, while Silver Dollar Studios — the studio co-founded by Flook — has made indie games as diverse and over-the-top as *Try Not to Fart*, *Who's the Daddy?* and the *Headshot* series. Did you form any kind of relationship with him as a co-winner?

JS We met at that Gamefest [in 2007], and he's a nice guy. I haven't really kept up with him, though. He's kind of a metalhead...so one of the first indie games he made, *The Headsman* — where you'd chop heads off prisoners and have to get them to fall in baskets — I was like, "This seems more like his bread and butter." When the rest of the Silver Dollar Games came out...I was kind of surprised. I'm happy for him, that he found his niche. The downside is that people are like, "Oh, indie games, the ones with the farts," and they'll sort of associate that with [XBLIG]. But some people associate it positively. Those games definitely stand out on their own merits.

Ska released *Z0MB1ES (on teh ph0ne)* for Windows Phone 7 in 2012.

"*Vampire Smile* felt like the point where I was a real game developer," says James.

OXM Do you think those more outlandish types of indie games denigrate Xbox Live's Indie Games channel?

JS I guess I'm a bit of that mindset, but [I also think] that's okay. I think the XBLIG channel should be celebrated for giving developers the ultimate freedom to publish games on a console. The fact that that's the type of game that showed up isn't what people should focus on; [when they do], it's unfortunate. Nobody focuses on the benefits, that there's no other way to put games on a console for under $100. Anyone can download the tools. It's like $50 for a four-month subscription. You can put the game on a console. Anyone can download it anywhere. I guess I can't say that anymore because Ouya launched, but still, with Xbox 360 you're talking about a [huge] market saturation. I can really get into that.

OXM How did you end up creating the XBLIG game *I MAED A GAM3 W1TH Z0MBIES 1N IT!!!1*?

JS I started it a couple of months after *Dead Samurai* launched, just as a dumb fun side-project. The premise of it was, you're playing a game with a character that's a developer, and the developer is just yelling about this game that he made, and you're playing it. Then I just started making it. I honestly thought it wouldn't even pass peer review because the spelling was screwy. I didn't anticipate it blowing up the way it did. I think it moved about a half-million copies. ...It took two weeks to make, literally.

I wish I could figure out what I did there so I could just do that at will. [laughs] I haven't released a small XBLIG game like that since — now I just overthink everything.

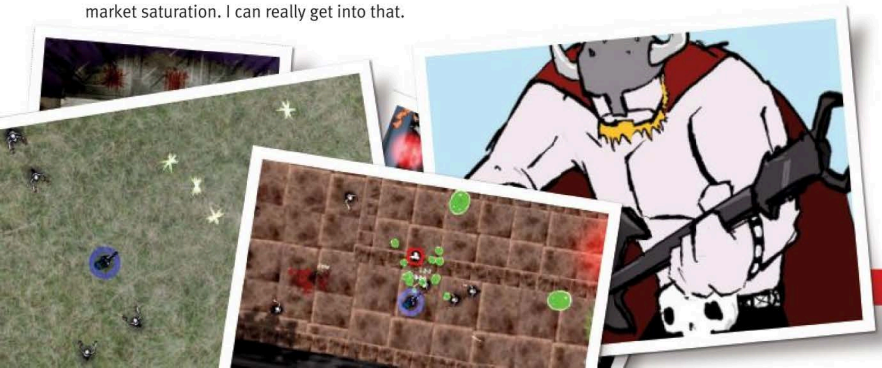
OXM What do you like about being a small indie developer? Is it the freedom, the challenge, the control over your product?

JS That's pretty much exactly it: We have our office in our basement. We wake up whenever we want. We're able to work from home whenever we want. We have freedom to do whatever we want. That's something I try to emphasize a lot; we publish through Microsoft, and that's pretty much all we've done since this became a viable business, but they let us do whatever we want.

I don't know what other people think about that kind of relationship, but we really do have total creative control....It's a thrill, just having an idea and putting it into a game. The challenge is, [this way of making games] gets kind of horrible toward the end.

MJS You don't have as much support from other teammates because you're only two people.

JS Yeah. I'm the developer. Michelle is the art. Finding the bugs, that's all through Microsoft, part of the publishing — but then fixing them is all on me. However much fun the creative part is, the bug-fixing part is negative fun. And it's not even that bad. But then there are those days where you fix three bugs, and in the time it took you to do that, the testers found eight more.



OXM Do you have ambitions of growing, or do you want to keep it a two-person operation?
MJS I like it the way it is.
JS It's nice the way it is. We're kind of at the point where it'd be a major shift to add more people.
MJS I was a test lead at ArenaNet, so moving from a 200-person company to a two-person company was a bit of a change. It's nice to have the freedom. You can really control what the game is. But then you do miss the environment, too, because it was 200 people that I knew. A lot of them were my friends, and now I'm not really around them anymore.

OXM You've said publicly that you have a great relationship with Microsoft. Do you generally view them as a good partner?
JS Well, the Dream-Build-Play [award] definitely started things off on the right foot. But since then we've published everything through them, and I think my totally uninteresting bottom line is that it's always been good. Basically, with everything since *Dead Samurai*, I write up a document saying, "I'd like to make this game." They look at it and say, "Make the game." Then I make it.
MJS We haven't heard "no" yet.
JS In terms of the publishing process, certain things have to get done, like testing and localization. A bunch of weird gamer-picture packs. But for the most part, it's just Michelle and I developing the game. They've always been super-supportive. They did a bunch of usability testing for *Charlie Murder*...and for *Vampire Smile* they did focus-testing with the target audience.

It was cool to see feedback about what clicked and what didn't. Someone was like, "This art looks community college–level" or something — that kinda stung. [laughs] But everything else was pretty good...And in terms of the whole process, it's always been fine. Nothing's been unreasonable. Certification is daunting, but it happens eventually. You fix the bugs and you get through cert.

OXM What do you think about the Xbox One?
JS We're excited for it. We've pre-ordered it. [laughs] We're talking to Microsoft about developing for it after *Charlie*. We're definitely working on some stuff for it.

OXM What's something that you want every one of your games to have? And what should your games *never* have?
JS Really tight controls are important to me. So is trying to make our games run at 60 frames per second as much as possible.
MJS As far as something we'd never want — microtransactions? [both laugh] We just don't think our games would be good with them. Like in *Dead Space 3*, the microtransactions don't have to exist, and [their presence] takes you out of the game.

OXM James, I've read about your "Bruce Lee was a dishwasher" comment, that you made to someone criticizing you back when you were washing dishes in a restaurant. Now that you're in such a different stage of your life, do you feel like you've "made it"?
JS I feel like in some ways I have. I've achieved the dream. We'll see how *Charlie Murder* does with critics and sales. I have no idea how it's going to be perceived after basically four years of looking at it. We've been working on it in earnest for two and a half years, but it was started four years ago.

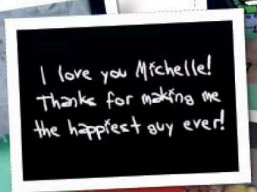
I feel like we're successful. I still feel like a dishwasher sometimes, though. We're not only geographically remote from any sort of scene, but we're kind of like...indie B-listers, I guess? I guess what happens is, you achieve some success and you feel pretty good about it, and then you read an article that says, "XNA's been used for some really good games like *Terraria* and *Bastion* and *Fez*." Every time something like that happens, you kind of feel a bit like a dishwasher again. No ill will toward those three great games, of course! But in terms of going from *Dishwasher* to a desk job to here, it's still pretty awesome. I still love it.

OXM Michelle, James had this pre-existing operation that you entered as a partner. What do you try to bring to Ska and your games?
MJS I was actually really surprised when, while we were dating, James asked me to work with the company, too. I just thought there was no way he would want another creative head in the mix, so at first I was really overwhelmed: *"This is so awesome. I get to be a developer and just make art."* I guess it's kind of turned into... I want to be able to express my own art style more.

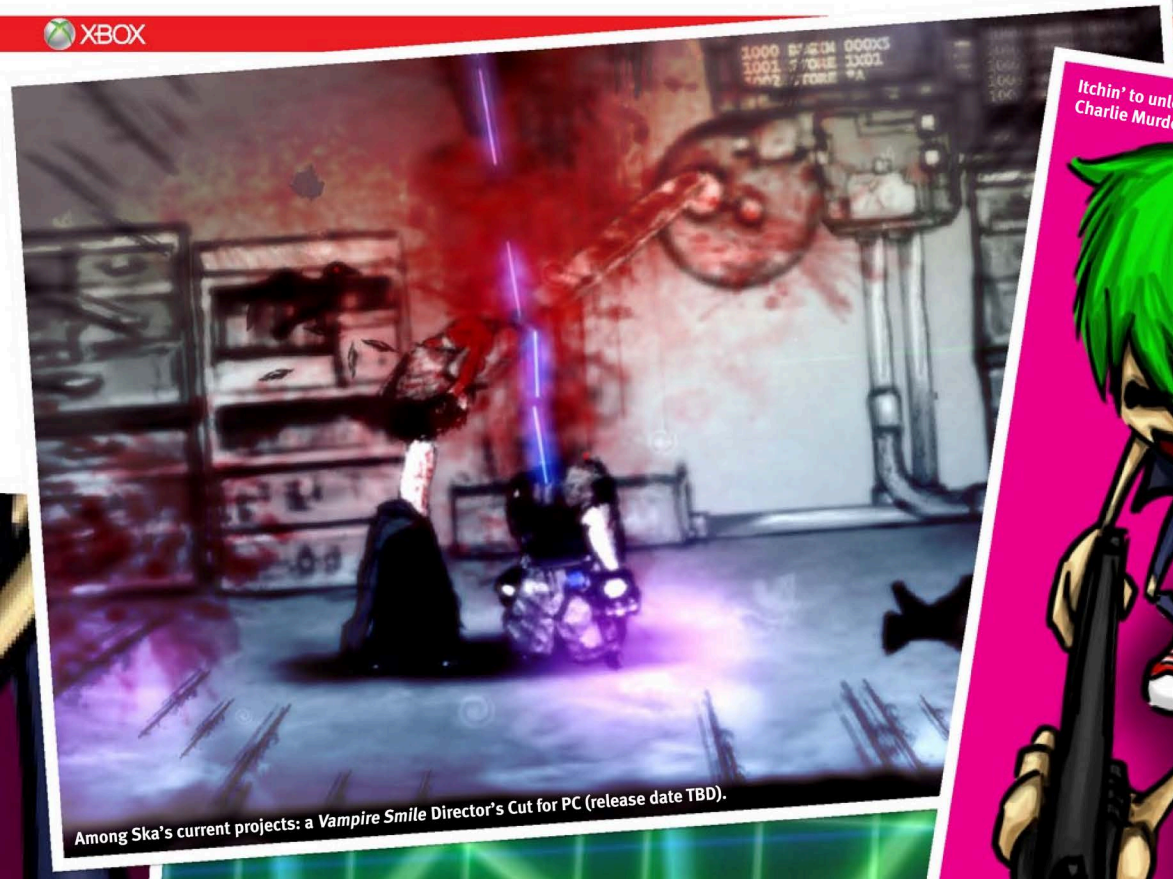
I think the most obvious example of my work in *Charlie Murder* is the sea monster (in the pirate-ship area). You look at the creature design and you're like, "That doesn't look like anything else in the game." I think what I do with monsters is I get a little bit more involved with them. I sort of come up with a story behind them, like, "Why do they look like this?"

OXM James, has Michelle's joining Ska affected how you make games or how you view game development?
JS I think it's about the same. I still put games together the same way. For *Charlie Murder* it was basically like, I'll tell Michelle what I need and I ask her what she can help with.
MJS We don't have too much of a system — it's just, we sit down, we're working. We do our own thing until one of us specifically needs something or has an idea. It's a [fluid] work environment rather than a structured one.
JS Right now I'm putting together the next project, basically. She's doing all of the PR stuff.
MJS Yeah, I'm still working on getting art together for [*Charlie Murder*]. He keeps trying to get me to work on the next game.

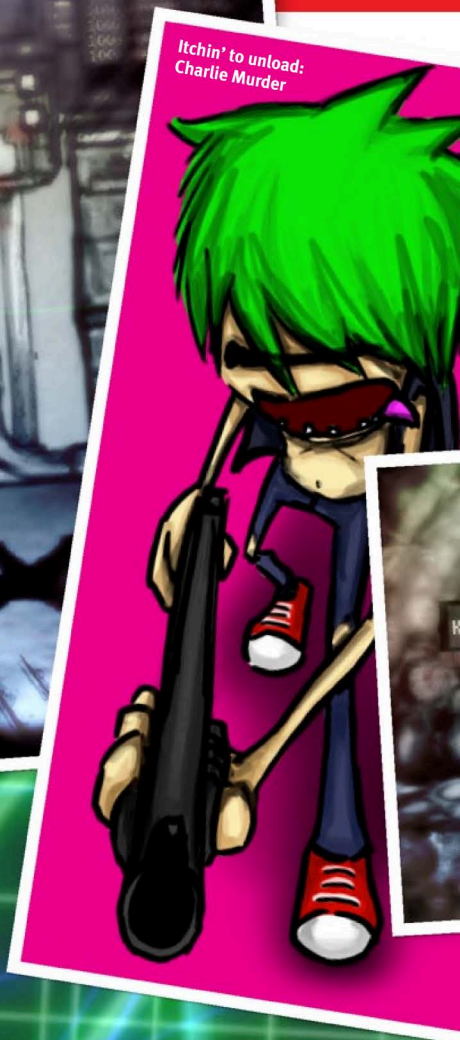
OXM Can you give any hints about what that next game will be?
JS I will say it's a return to unforgiving difficulty. It's not another *Dishwasher* or *ZP2KX*; It's something totally new. New fun ideas inspired by games that we love.



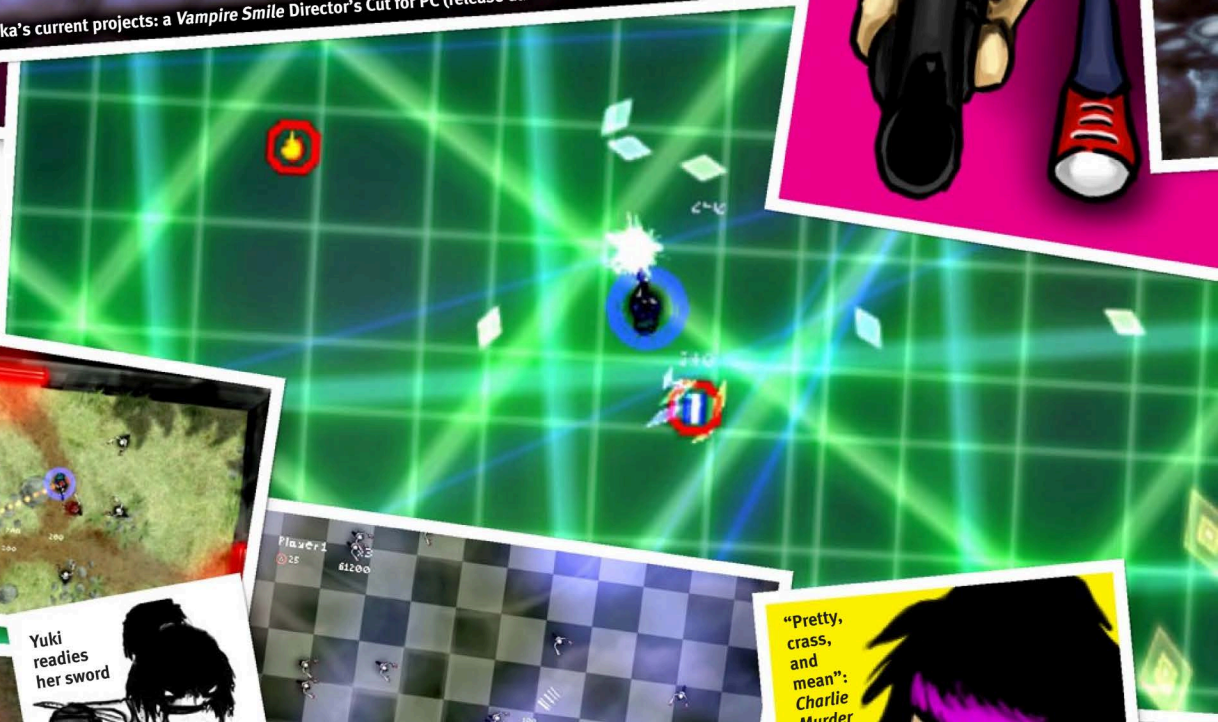
While proposing to Michelle at PAX 2011 (right), James had a videogame version of the event (left) running in the background.

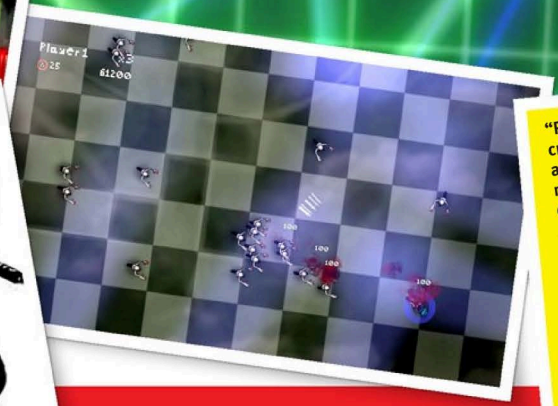


Among Ska's current projects: a *Vampire Smile* Director's Cut for PC (release date TBD).

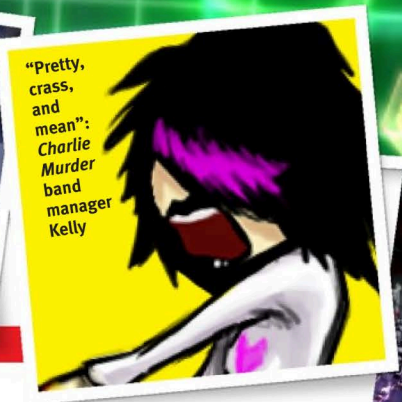


Itchin' to unload: Charlie Murder



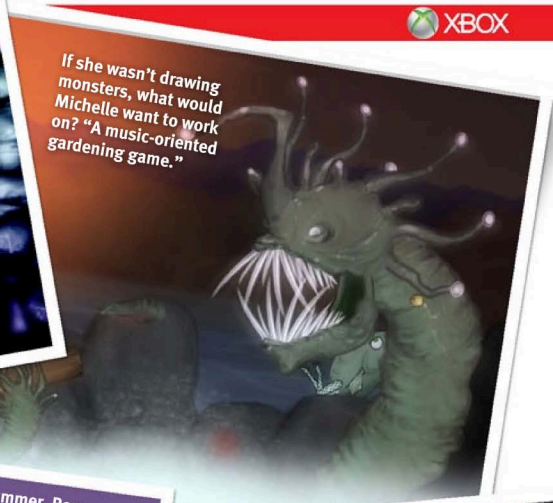


Yuki readies her sword

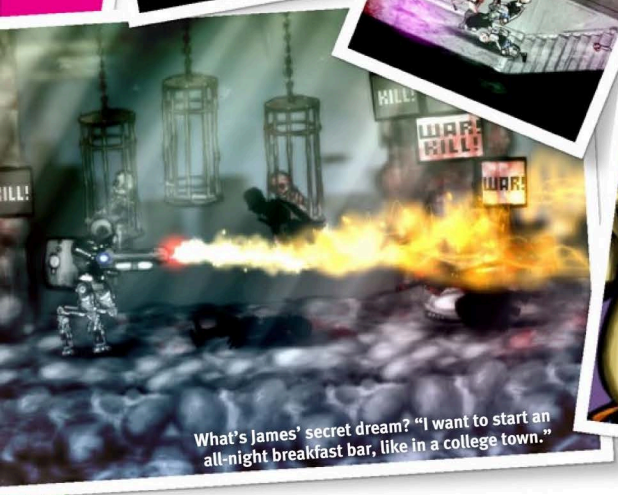


"Pretty, crass, and mean": *Charlie Murder* band manager Kelly

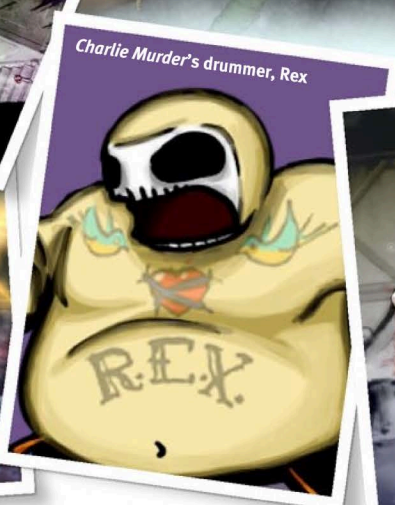
"I love the way it feels — being able to interact with a game and stuff just explodes," says James.



If she wasn't drawing monsters, what would Michelle want to work on? "A music-oriented gardening game."



What's James' secret dream? "I want to start an all-night breakfast bar, like in a college town."



Charlie Murder's drummer, Rex

OXM How'd you come up with the idea for *Charlie Murder*? What's unique about it?
JS It's almost like a spiritual successor to *Zombie Smashers X* — "a bunch of punk rockers fighting zombies" was how the premise started. Being able to turn it into an XBLA game was a big opportunity; how do we make this mean something? So we made it a band fighting off the zombie apocalypse. There's a lot of backstory and depth.
MJS James was inspired by a real-life event that we can't talk about. So there's more emotional involvement now [in the story than there was when we started development].

OXM Are you alluding to the betrayal-of-the-band-member story element in *Charlie Murder*?
JS Yeah.
MJS It's not risky [per se], but you do make yourself vulnerable when you put something like that into a work that a lot of people are going to see.

OXM Do you feel like it's the first time you've touched on something personal like that?
JS [Yeah]. Just the idea of, you have everything, and then everything just comes crashing down. That's kind of this fear that I've had all along — of going from indie rock star to nothing. I basically put that fear into Charlie Murder, the character. That's Charlie.
MJS [Charlie's] band got caught up in what they were doing and didn't really consider what effects they might be having on other people.

OXM What other game devs do you admire?
MJS I'm a big fan of Supergiant Games (*Bastion*). Those guys have this humble mentality, they're all really cool.
JS I have a huge man-crush on Dean Dodrill (*Dust: An Elysian Tail*). He got into XNA development using this book I wrote [*Building XNA 2.0 Games*] that was really bad. He emailed me to show me his [work-in-progress], and we stayed in touch while he was working on *Dust*. I just wish him all the success in the world; any credit we can give ourselves for being a small team and putting together a big project is absolutely dwarfed by *Dust*. The fact that he was able to build that by himself, coming from really no game-development experience, is unreal.

OXM How has the market for the kinds of games you make changed since you started?
JS I think there's a market now for people who want to play indie games as a brand or as a concept, whereas there wasn't years ago. That's great. Developing games for a console, that's really where I want to be...I think consoles will be relevant for a long time.

OXM More generally, what's Ska's No. 1 goal?
JS Oh, man. We need a goal. [laughter]
MJS Our goal seems to be just remaining able to make games like we are, being able to support ourselves and keep on doing fun stuff.
JS Our goal is to maintain. I mean, Bungie's goal is world domination. We could do something like that.
MJS It's maintaining in a way that grows with trends. We're obviously not going to be able to use XNA forever, so we're going to have to be able to grow to survive as a company. But it's still...maintain the company. Keep doing what we're doing.
JS Our goal is to spread the joy.

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THE VERDICT

XBOX OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

How do we determine review scores? With a special quantum microscope that measures game quality at a subatomic level, of course! It's a flawless process, but we always get questions about it, so here's how to interpret the results:

11: Perfect Mecha Godzilla's Choice
The unicorn. Will never happen. Never.

10: Classic Editors' Choice
One of those rare and very best of games. Every Xbox gamer simply must buy it and play it, regardless of whether they're a fan of the genre.

9.0 or 9.5: Awesome Editors' Choice
Very impressive. One of the best games around. May have a few minor problems, but they're small and very easily tolerated.

8.0 or 8.5: Great
A great game and an A-list title, but it either has niche appeal, suffers from minor technical or design issues, or has peripheral problems like a crummy interface.

7.0 or 7.5: Good
Has a lot of good things going for it, but there's a big problem or two — something that limits its appeal or gets downright annoying. Could also be a game that aims low but hits surprisingly high.

6.0 or 6.5: Decent
An adequate game with something interesting to offer, but it has some truly significant issues. Otaku won't mind much, but the rest of the world will.

5.0 or 5.5: Mediocre
Very unspecial and average in the worst sense of that word. You can't pound it for being terrible, but it's hard to find something that makes it worthy of recommendation.

4.0 or 4.5: Deficient
It has some very serious flaws and problems, but you can play it if you're interested. It works and does what it sets out to do, but it probably never aimed that high in the first place.

3.0 or 3.5: Wounded
It has some crippling problems and is poorly conceived and designed. You can imagine someone wanting to try it, but not that many people, and they all should rent before they buy.

0.0 – 2.5: Broken
Just really bad. Lacks a single redeeming quality, and/or it's busted to varying degrees in its design, quality, or basic functionality. No gamer of any stripe should bother.

Charlie Murder, page 70

NCAA Football 14, page 74

NEXT ISSUE: We're planning, but not promising, to have reviews of *The Bureau: XCOM Declassified*, *Flashback*, *Mars: War Logs*, *Saints Row IV*, *Splinter Cell Blacklist*, *TMNT: Out of the Shadows*, and more.

That big red dude with the leathery wings is Beelzebaal. He's kind of a badass.

Charlie Murder

Killing it in the name of rock 'n' roll

PLATFORM XBLA **PUB** Microsoft **DEV** Ska Studios **ESRB** Mature **MULTIPLAYER** 4 co-op local or online **ACHIEVEMENTS** Middle of the road **COST** 800 MS Points ($10)

XBOX OFFICIAL MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

BANDS BREAK UP all the time, but when Charlie Murder's new project leaves a former songwriting partner behind, it might just be the end of the world. Rather than growl out some angry death metal and call it a day, that shunned pal becomes Lord Mortimer and unleashes an evil army. Now, as Charlie and/or one of his bandmates, you'll embark on a wild sidescrolling extravaganza that somehow manages to be both instantly accessible and utterly distinctive.

Much like *Castle Crashers* (or even Ska Studios' own *Dishwasher* games), this co-op beat-'em-up has some pretty straightforward brawling mechanics: you pound buttons for light and heavy attacks, string assaults together into crazed combos, and block incoming blows as best you can. Enemies come in a ludicrously diverse array of shapes and sizes, from zombies and broom-riding witches to ninjas, pirates, and giant rats. The sheer range of critters will serve as welcome relief to anyone fed up with the generic thugs that populate a shameful number of even big-budget productions.

The title character himself is certainly an effective fighter, but his four bandmates aren't content to slouch around backstage. From Lester the guitarist's "burning riff" fireballs and Tommy's acid-drenched buzzsaw-generating basslines to Rex's hilarious ability to conjure and pound a debris-spewing drumkit, all five musicians are amusing to watch and fun to play. And while many of their basic moves naturally amount to simple punches and kicks, you'll quickly learn to launch foes skyward for a bit of brutal airborne juggling, or to grab and toss creeps into their comrades.

What truly distinguishes *Charlie Murder*'s mayhem, though, is its obvious affection for punk rock's do-it-yourself ethic. Punk is about doing the best you can with the materials available, rather than obsessing over perfection and polishing everything until its creative pulse becomes a hollow, over-produced thud. This game relishes the rough edges of its hand-crafted aesthetic (and catchy lo-fi music) without ever feeling sloppy or half-assed. Indeed, quite the opposite: from small-town asphalt and sunset-lit cliffs to filthy caves and haunted corridors, every environment crackles with personality and bursts with detailed and breakable scenery.

The simple puzzles scattered about never involve more than triggering switches or tossing grenades into barricades, but who cares when destroyed police cars yield firearms, ambulances drop medical supplies, and every stop sign can be yanked out of the ground and turned into a bludgeon? Hell, even the monsters themselves leave plenty of goodies behind — and not just clothing items that offer improved protection, RPG-style bonuses to character stats, and a new look. You can kill a pumpkin-headed boss and use his severed arm as a club, or even stomp a zombie's face into the dirt and turn his brain into a projectile. There are truly *tons* of weapons to try out, and exploring the possibilities always seems to spawn new ones; any attempt to play this game for "just a little while" can easily become an hours-long marathon.

As monsters fall to pieces, all five heroes steadily rise to become demigods. Because every enemy you bury earns you followers (read: experience), you'll periodically spend points to upgrade character stats, learn how to perform charged attacks, improve damage with particular weapon categories, and more. Each musician becomes more distinct over time, too, thanks to character-specific tattoos that unlock special

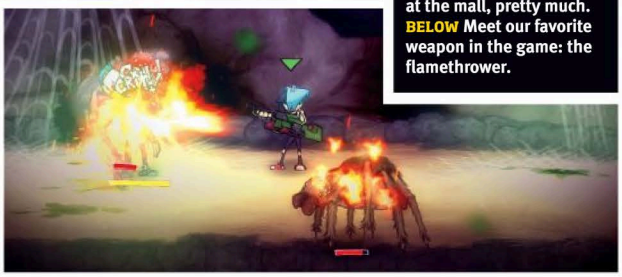
AFTERLIFE: Play through *Charlie Murder*'s campaign once, and you'll still have two more difficult versions of the adventure to tackle. Don't worry: you can always return to the relative safety of "Normal" mode.

Pill Popper

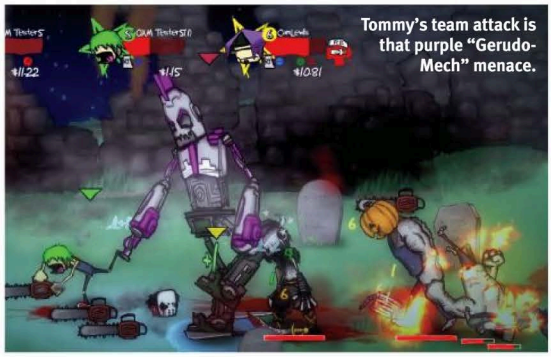
One of *Charlie Murder*'s most fun and surprising sequences occurs when your character cavalierly scarfs down an unknown hallucinogen at a campground. Glowing trees sprout, occult symbols adorn the ground, and colorful mists swirl as you chainsaw through horned devils and direct shotgun blasts at some poor soul's disembodied central nervous system. And that's before it all turns into a dark cautionary tale...

Ah, if only making quality music were as easy as tapping a few face buttons to the beat.

No road is safe from these nutcases.



LEFT Firearms, huge circular saws, and mohawked zombies. Yup, Saturday at the mall, pretty much. **BELOW** Meet our favorite weapon in the game: the flamethrower.



Tommy's team attack is that purple "Gerudo-Mech" menace.

abilities: Kelly might summon a ring of gleaming safety pins to encircle her, for example, while Charlie can turn piles of body bits and detritus into destructive cyclones and Lester can give everyone a temporary defensive boost.

Playing on your own is sure to induce a low-key grin, but *Charlie Murder* positively *demands* to be experienced with friends, and not just because team attacks dole out such impressive damage. The enemy population scales to match the number of rockers wreaking havoc, invariably turning "great fun" into "absolute madness." Moreover, playing cooperatively transforms brief and somewhat disposable diversions like button-tapping musical minigames and a *Narc*-like driving sequence into memorable events, and spontaneous laughter can't help but erupt. Even the option to create bonus-bestowing beers from gathered ingredients changes into a brief social event in co-op games — though if you crave violence, you can also enter a few PvP arenas (like a gym with a boxing ring) to pummel your buddies for a while.

While it's occasionally hard to keep track of your hero in the screen-filling carnage, conquering strange beasts and brutal bosses alongside pals only amplifies the sense of accomplishment, even if your friends get greedy and grabby with the loot left behind. At only 10 bucks, *Charlie Murder* is both a killer game and a solid value for solo artists; for anyone with a few friends willing to join the slaughter, it's damn near mandatory. — **CAMERON LEWIS**

- \+ Awesome co-op combat; five distinct characters; striking punk-rock aesthetic; high replayability.
- \+ Enemy, weapon, and environment variety; light RPG character upgrading and loot lust; low price.
- \- Characters can get lost in the multiplayer mayhem; not quite as much fun to play solo.
- ? Dead eagles burst into fireballs?!

XBOX OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

VERDICT 9.0

FOR THE SQUEAMISH: Not crazy about splattering your television screen with crimson gore? Head to *Charlie Murder*'s settings menu, where you can change the color of blood to green.

Bonnie's story feels the most disconnected from the others, but in an interesting way: it spins its tale differently than we're used to with Telltale games.

The Walking Dead: 400 Days

From shades of gray to pitch-black

PLATFORM XBLA **PUB/DEV** Telltale Games **MULTIPLAYER** No **ESRB** Mature **ACHIEVEMENTS** Story-based + two optional (100G total) **COST** 400 MS Points ($5)

FACED WITH POSSIBLE extinction, what would you do to survive? Would you leave a friend to a ghastly fate to save your own skin? Or compromise your ethics — maybe even your humanity — for the sake of preserving order? You may think you've faced these questions before, alongside Lee and Clementine in *The Walking Dead*'s superb first season, but developer Telltale somehow manages to give them new urgency in this downloadable add-on by introducing us to new characters facing similar life-or-death dilemmas amid the zombie pandemic.

Each of *400 Days*' five chapters focuses on a different survivor (Shel, Wyatt, Bonnie, Vince, or Russell), and while you can play these 10- to 20-minute vignettes in any order, they're quasi-connected. The thin thread between each is that that they're all loosely tied to a central location — a roadside restaurant called Red's Diner — over the course of (wait for it) 400 days since the world's gone to hell. For instance, prisoner Vince's segment takes place only two days after walkers have begun appearing, while Shel's story plays out several months in, showing a ramshackle community struggling with the hard realities of day-to-day existence.

Every chapter does a spectacular job of putting you in a specific place and frame of mind. Whether it's Wyatt and his motormouth friend Eddie playing an impromptu game of rock-paper-scissors to decide who'll check on a potential roadkill during a nighttime drive, or the wayward Russell gravely deciding whether hitching a ride with the living is worse than braving a walk with the undead, *400 Days* packs nearly every moment of every story with enough character development and nuance that they speak volumes about their individual situations. That's not only incredibly impressive, but important, too, given that our total time with this new cast is about 90 minutes. Building Lee's relationship with Clementine in Season One was a slow burn over the course of months and five episodes; our tether to the folks in *400 Days* is more tenuous, less emotional.

But the fact that this slice of the *Walking Dead* universe sticks to the series' tradition of presenting tough, complicated choices with outcomes that are neither black nor white — only "kind of bad" or "potentially *really* bad" — gives you room to role-play as each of the different characters. Though *400 Days* doesn't exactly offer up a gee-golly cast of angels, you can smooth or deepen the flaws in each based on your decisions. Do you play Vince as an unrepentant murderer, or as a remorseful guy who's done some very bad things? Does Bonnie own up to a dark secret, or hide it? To its credit, *400 Days* makes most of the vignettes worth replaying due to the subtly different results of different choices.

And however you play each story, Telltale's seemingly simple presenta-

HEY YOU: In Russell's portion of *400 Days*, make sure you hide when the truck's driving toward you: you'll see a familiar face *and* unlock an Achievement.

ABOVE The smart-alecky banter between Eddie and Wyatt proves to be some of the game's funniest (and most natural) writing. **BELOW** There are no victors in Vince's chapter. (He's in the middle, holding the shotgun.)

tion reveals its writers' skill in surfacing humanity in even the most inhumane acts. (After all, in the zombie apocalypse, does "doing what's right" even matter anymore?) Action segments come slightly faster and more furious in some of these stories than they did in most of Season One, with rudimentary gunplay and weapon-handling conveying a more grisly side of survival, but decision-making remains the game's biggest challenge — and draw. While the lasting effect of those choices won't resonate or satisfy quite as much as they did in Lee's lengthier journey, *400 Days* is clear in its intentions to set up what's to come in Season Two — both in its gameplay and in introducing us to characters who, depending on how you play it, may appear in the series down the road. That doesn't make this "special episode" a must-play for the merely curious, but it's more than enough incentive for those determined to continue the journey.

— FRANCESCA REYES

+ Concisely designed to play like an anthology of short stories.
+ Interesting characters; good variety of choices and dilemmas.
- Short runtime won't invest you deeply in these new characters.
? Is Eddie some sort of roshambo savant?

XBOX OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

VERDICT 8.0

ABOVE You'll earn little XP bonuses for just about every successful attack. **BELOW** Special attacks tend to do more damage, but they also use up more of your green energy bar.

Pacific Rim

Sloppy sock-'em robots

PUBLISHER Yuke's **DEVELOPER** Yuke's **ESRB** Everyone 10+
MULTIPLAYER 2 on same console or Xbox Live
ACHIEVEMENTS Glacial **COST** 800 Microsoft Points ($10)

XBOX LIVE ARCADE

WHEN AN INTER-DIMENSIONAL portal sets loose monsters the size of skyscrapers, humanity builds towering robots with which to smash them to bits. But while the *Pacific Rim* film features combatants who do goofy fun stuff like swing cargo ships as if they were baseball bats, the game's pugilists must content themselves with by-the-numbers bash-and-block fisticuffs.

For what it's worth, you choose between three Jaegers (i.e., robots) and two Kaiju (i.e., monsters) before you stride into battle, and each has its own light, strong, and special attacks. But don't expect much in the way of tactics from A.I. simpletons who slavishly adhere to just a handful of attack patterns. What's more, letting your available energy accumulate to 90% or over enables you to fire finishing moves that can instantly end every match except the last. Expect to put the 12 brawls of this rudimentary campaign to bed in two hours.

Spending experience points earned in battle on new warrior-customizing parts and abilities might've lured some players into pursuing better mission medals and completing the more challenging Survival maps. Sadly, unlocking them for purchase takes so long that you'll have long since grown sick of the game's poor collision detection and general lack of excitement.

You might well opt to buy stat upgrades or temporary performance-boosting items instead, for the sake of simple one-on-one multiplayer confrontations. But because stat upgrades make little difference in the field, and you can carry only a single boost item at a time, you're probably better off just playing something else altogether. **— CAMERON LEWIS**

+ Decent variety of robots and monsters; build your own boxer from parts/abilities.
- Lack of enemy pattern variety makes solo bouts exercises in timed blocking.
- Exploitable finishing moves; short campaign; poor collision detection; unlocking new gear/abilities takes forever.
? What kind of savage monster agrees to a match time limit?

XBOX OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

VERDICT 4.5

JAEGER MEISTER: If you want to customize the look of your *Pacific Rim* fighter even a little bit, you'll have to shell out another 240 Microsoft Points ($3) for the Jaeger Designer DLC. Weak.

The Infinity physics engine allows for harder-looking hits and more realistic reactions.

LEFT More option plays are available, with better indicators to make them easier to run. **RIGHT** Ultimate Team finally hits *NCAA Football*, letting you build a squad using cards of notable former college players.

NCAA Football 14

Another routine victory

PUBLISHER EA Sports **DEVELOPER** EA Tiburon **ESRB** Everyone **MULTIPLAYER** 2 on Xbox Live, 4 on same screen **ACHIEVEMENTS** Varied **COST** $60

ON XBOX 360

WITH EA SPORTS gearing up to transition its many notable franchises to the Xbox One, we hoped that *NCAA Football 14* would serve as a last big hurrah on the 360 — something to pump a little life back into the series after last year's solid-but-unspectacular entry (*OXM* rating: 7.5). However, the college brand's reputation for being a *Madden* also-ran that's behind its pro sibling's upgrade cycle is only cemented here, with another very good simulation that doesn't rouse much more excitement than the last couple.

On the field, the upgrades are small but appreciated. The running game is lightly enhanced by the abilities to cut quickly, use combo juke moves, and try to recover from stumbles, while better on-screen option indicators make spread option-plays a more user-friendly pick. Otherwise, *NCAA 14* is largely the same tried-and-true EA football experience we've come to know and enjoy in recent years, albeit now with the addition of the physics system (plus optional Kinect voice commands) introduced in *Madden NFL 13*.

The Infinity Engine arrived a bit unpolished in *Madden*, and nearly a year's worth of work hasn't completely eliminated the dodgy moments of seeing players trip over each other after a play — though the visual miscues seem slightly less common this time around. More notably, we're glad to see the canned animations of past entries depart, and the physics-based interactions make for some harder-feeling hits on the field. As before, however, *NCAA 14* lacks presentational pop, and the lively nature of college sports doesn't always shine through. Sadly, generic, interchangeable team intro clips, dull ESPN score updates and commentary, and some unfinished-looking stadium exteriors sully the enthusiasm to some extent.

Ultimate Team mode finally makes its *NCAA Football* debut, and it's a great timesink, letting you build a custom team using cards of past college greats like Aaron Rodgers and Tim Tebow. The Nike Skills Trainer is also a nice addition, as it makes several advanced techniques easier to learn. Dynasty mode, meanwhile, adds a coach skill-upgrade system that offers on-the-field enhancements for dedicated play, plus a streamlined, points-based recruiting approach, although the latter feels too simplified and sucks the appeal out of pursuing players.

EA Sports has removed some modes and features this year (like Heisman Challenge) while others return or debut, but ultimately, the end experience feels about the same. As expected, *NCAA 14* is an entertaining game of college ball, but rarely much more. — **ANDREW HAYWARD**

+ Polished on-the-field action with nice new tweaks.
+ Ultimate Team mode is a late but stellar addition.
– More of the same; still feels a bit second-string compared to *Madden*.
? Will this series be properly rebooted for Xbox One?

XBOX OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE
VERDICT 7.5

INCOMING: Starting in 2014, college football will finally have a playoff system. However, *NCAA Football 14* doesn't include it in later years of Dynasty mode. *NCAA 15* better have it!

Microsoft

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Microsoft Studios

XBOX 360

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Xbox Live Gold membership (sold separately) and broadband internet required; ISP fees apply. Additional in-game content available and sold separately. All images, content, and text © 2013 Wargaming.net LLP. All rights reserved. WORLD OF TANKS, WARGAMING.NET and the WORLD OF TANKS, WARGAMING.NET logos are registered trademarks of Wargaming.net LLP in the United States. All other marks are trademarks or service marks of their respective owners.

The town of Dead End — Jake's hub world, where he can upgrade his weapons and bike — is depressingly devoid of any activity.

Retribution doesn't skimp on the smut, and it's executed just as poorly as the rest of the game.

Ride to Hell: Retribution

"Hell" is an understatement

PUBLISHER Deep Silver **DEVELOPER** Eutechnyx **ESRB** Mature **MULTIPLAYER** None **ACHIEVEMENTS** Mercifully easy **COST** $30

EUTECHNYX'S ACTION GAME took the scenic route to the 360, starting its journey as an open-world opus when first revealed in August 2008. Nearly a half-decade later, it's arrived in the form of *Ride to Hell: Retribution*, a now-linear mess of awful mechanics, broken A.I., and constant glitches that wouldn't have been remotely acceptable even in the console's early days.

Set during the post–Vietnam War 1960s, *Retribution* puts you in the biker boots of Jake Conway as he hunts down the top eight riders in "The Devil's Hand," a motorcycle gang systematically killing off the Conway clan. With a single exception, the hunt boils down to a driving sequence to meet someone who knows a Devil's Hand member; performing a task for them (involving combat or additional driving); driving to meet the member while fending off enemy bikers; fighting through a heavily defended stage; and then a boss battle against the gang member (occasionally involving a post-fight bike chase). Sometimes you'll race someone to prove yourself, but it's a pretty repetitive sequence of events across *Retribution*'s 8 to 10 hours.

Not helping matters are poorly animated characters interacting in drab environments — both subject to frequent texture-dropping — and a boring storyline with ill-defined characters and cringe-worthy moments. Supposedly central characters are shoehorned in awkwardly, nonsensical revelations hit with the impact of a bag of feathers, the lead character can contact allies from afar with the most anachronistic walkie-talkie of the '60s, and the many romantic encounters throughout the game are graphic yet keep all of the participants fully clothed. While *Retribution*'s cutscenes initially promise some B-movie camp on par with quirky cult-favorite *Deadly Premonition*, they quickly become a snoozefest we wouldn't even recommend watching on YouTube.

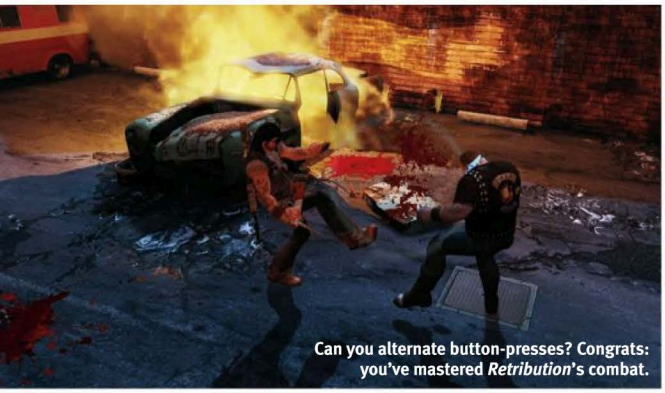
Retribution wipes out hardest, though, by delivering gameplay that's incompetent across the board. Motorcycle riding is super-skittish, combining annoying obstacle avoidance with super-frustrating button-prompt combat. Tricks require next to nothing in the way of balance or skill: unlike a wheelie or a drift in decent racers, a trick lasts as long as you hold down the button and avoid hitting something. Combat's even worse, with hand-to-hand fights winnable through mindless button-mashing and super-simple button prompts, plus gunplay that ranges from unfair fights against supremely accurate A.I. to shooting sitting-duck enemies standing together motionless.

The game also harbors a staggering level of bugginess that makes you wonder how it passed certification. At one point, roughly half of our post-

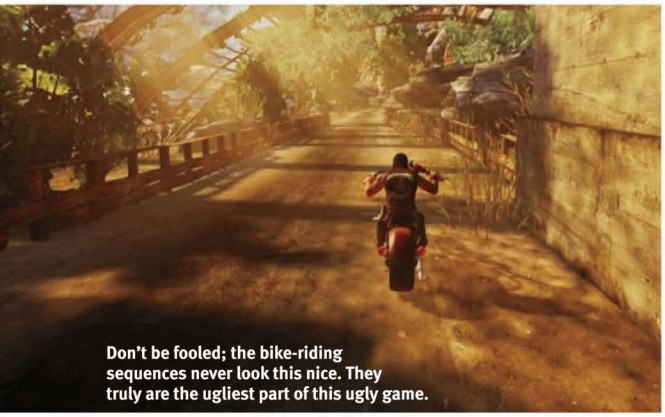
THE ONES: *Retribution* is the first Xbox 360 game to earn a 1.0 from *OXM*, joining original-Xbox games *Pulse Racer*, *Bad Boys: Miami Takedown*, and *World War II Combat: Road to Berlin*.

BELOW You get the sense that the developers left a lot of this game blank (like that billboard) but forgot to fill it in later.

ABOVE If you dish enough damage, you'll be able to pull off awkwardly animated "Rage" finishers.



Can you alternate button-presses? Congrats: you've mastered *Retribution*'s combat.



Don't be fooled; the bike-riding sequences never look this nice. They truly are the ugliest part of this ugly game.

death restarts would lead to a hanging load screen, requiring us to quit out to the 360 dashboard. Less frequent (but more baffling) were scenes where we received a new objective but were unable to access the new area, and others where we encountered a debug error message when a new wave of enemies couldn't properly load.

Even if Eutechnyx patches *Ride to Hell: Retribution*'s numerous glitches, there's no fix for its inherent awfulness. If anything, the game should stay the way it is right now, so that the bottom of the barrel is firmly established.

— DAVE RUDDEN

- Terrible gunplay and racing segments are a chore to complete.
- A.I. bounces between being brain-dead and overbearingly difficult.
- Frequent game-crashing bugs make a horrendous experience even worse.
- ? What's the worst part of this atrocity? We say the "romantic encounters."

XBOX OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

VERDICT 1.0

ABOVE Several power-ups offer a boost, such as these wings, which require you to flap your arms for a quicker ascent. **LEFT** Boss fights are an interesting and challenging twist in the Kinect version.

Doodle Jump for Kinect

The mobile hit fumbles the landing

PLATFORM Xbox Live Arcade **PUB** D3Publisher of America
DEV Smoking Gun Interactive/Lima Sky **ESRB** Everyone **MULTIPLAYER** None
ACHIEVEMENTS Taxing **COST** 400 Microsoft Points ($5)

THE MOVE FROM mobile favorite to Kinect controls worked out well enough for *Fruit Ninja*, but *Doodle Jump* isn't quite as successful in its leap to console. *Doodle Jump for Kinect* reimagines the endless jumping game as a series of start-to-finish levels, each of which has your always-bopping cartoon character scaling floating platforms until you reach the goal. Thankfully, you don't have to jump in place constantly — you use simple sidesteps to move left and right, while raising either hand to fire projectiles at enemies. Power-ups require the occasional hop, crouch, hand-clap, or arm-flapping motion.

Though it's an unconventional interpretation of the tilt-based phone game, *Doodle Jump for Kinect* functions solidly with motion controls. Early levels are simple, straightforward, and relatively brief, but that quickly changes as additional gameplay mechanics and foes pile atop each other, which turns many of the 30 stages (including three boss battles) into messy, arduous gauntlets. You'll bounce into unseen hazards, have enemies fired out of cannons directly above you, and frequently encounter other hard-luck scenarios that make the brutal obstacle courses more mentally exhausting than physically so.

When stages start stretching past 10 to 15 minutes apiece thanks to minimal checkpoints and dozens of cheap deaths, though, the game known as a breezy pick-up-and-play classic on phones instead feels like a bitter grind on 360. *Doodle Jump for Kinect* may nail the HD doodle aesthetic and maintain many of the same mechanics, but it lacks the breezily amusing soul of the original. **— ANDREW HAYWARD**

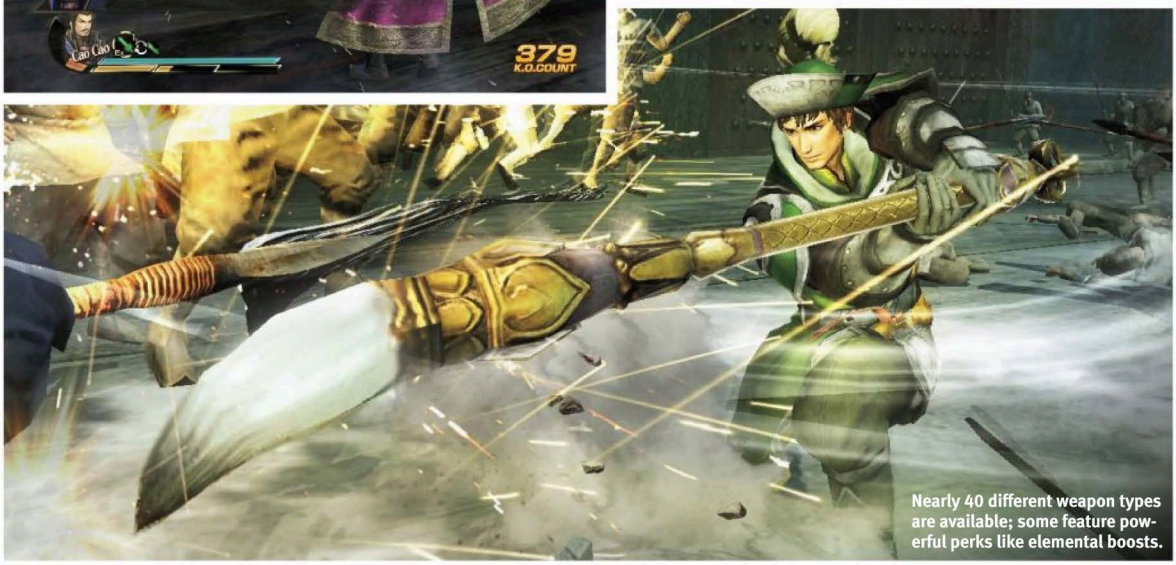
- + Great cartoonish look; Kinect controls are solid.
- − Cheap deaths due to unseen hazards and launched foes.
- − Few checkpoints make for long, tiring stages.
- ? Is this Kinect's last gasp on Xbox 360?

XBOX OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

VERDICT 4.5

DOODLE CHAMP: *Doodle Jump* has reportedly been downloaded more than 150 million times across mobile and tablet platforms. It's even available as an arcade cabinet now!

LEFT Dozens of stages and characters — and so much tedium along with 'em. **RIGHT** Flashy Musou and Rage attacks lose their luster when used numerous times in each battle.



Nearly 40 different weapon types are available; some feature powerful perks like elemental boosts.

Dynasty Warriors 8

Losing the battle against mediocrity

PUB Tecmo Koei **DEV** Omega Force **ESRB** Teen **MULTIPLAYER** 2 locally (split-screen mode) or over Xbox Live **ACHIEVEMENTS** Daunting **COST** $60

ON XBOX 360

IF THERE'S ONE franchise that embodies the law of diminishing returns, it's *Dynasty Warriors*. The once-magical sensation of bashing thousands of baddies has worn wearyingly thin through dozens of similar hack-and-slash affairs (including spinoffs and expansions), and *Dynasty Warriors 8* only further perpetrates mediocrity while struggling with agonizing technical issues.

Dynasty Warriors 8 returns once more to the Three Kingdoms era of Chinese history, putting you in command of one of scads of weapon-clad brawlers fighting for control of the land. As usual, the game delivers an intimidating amount of content with four main story campaigns (along with a series of bonus missions), dozens of distinct stages, and more than 70 playable characters. No doubt, there's a lot of bang for the buck here for the obsessive action fan.

But eye-popping numbers aren't entertaining in and of themselves, and neither are the repetitive and utterly forgettable missions held within. The dry, historical narrative and barely defined characters don't help matters, but it's the ordinary and constantly repeated objectives — which typically revolve around toppling a series of indistinguishable generals — that weigh down the action. Each level generates a higher body count than the average first-person-shooter campaign, yet the mundane approach and brainless foes make the combat feel unsatisfying and oddly lifeless. Amassing new weapons and skills still provides a small hook, but even combat additions like the Storm Rush melee barrage and powered-up Rage-meter attacks fail to liven up the routine.

Beyond the usual array of story missions (now playable in online or local co-op) and customizable single stages, *Dynasty Warriors 8* does introduce one initially intriguing new option with Ambition mode, in which you aim to erect a palace for the visiting emperor by accumulating resources and allies to build up your camp. You'll do so, naturally, by engaging in even more tedious battles, making the mode ultimately seem like just another way to stretch out the same content.

Performance issues only add insult to injury. Simplistic models, muddy textures, distractingly visible cracks between polygons, and entire enemy squadrons that appear out of thin air are small complaints compared to the dramatic slowdown that recurs, making the game run at half-speed for lengthy, sustained periods (adding at least 15 minutes to the completion time in one mission, for example). *Dynasty Warriors 8* should be the pristine, refined culmination of a long-running franchise, but instead it's a reminder of how much a series can deteriorate when it coasts on its success.

— ANDREW HAYWARD

+ Clearing entire battlefields with ease amuses at times.
- Rote missions and unsatisfying action wear thin quickly.
- Poor visuals, plus severe performance issues kill the pace.
? Will *Warriors* even evolve for Xbox One?

XBOX OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE
VERDICT 4.0

PASSED OVER: Not every *Warriors* entry has come to Xbox 360: *Dynasty Warriors 7*'s *Xtreme Legends* and *Empires* standalone expansions never made their way to the console.

R.I.P.D.: The Game

Some things are better left buried

PUB Atlus **DEV** Old School Games **ESRB** Teen **MULTIPLAYER** 2 on Xbox Live **ACHIEVEMENTS** Trickle **COST** 800 Microsoft Points ($10)

When righteous cops die, sometimes they're drafted into a different kind of police force on their way to the afterlife. This elite group hunts down and dispatches corrupt souls who'd rather raise a ruckus on Earth than face an unfavorable final judgment. But *R.I.P.D.* players needn't worry about theology: you'll just swagger into third-person gunplay as either of the movie's two leads.

Don't go looking for a campaign either, because there isn't one. Instead, you'll hook up with an online partner — provided you can find one, of course — and grind your way through five increasingly powerful waves of "Deado" creeps on seven different maps. Undead dudes armed with bats and toilet plungers (*yuck!*) slowly give way to snipers' tell-tale lasers and the energy beams of enemy healers. None of your foes do anything more inventive than charge and attack or hang back and dodge, but there's at least a modicum of variety. Some, like cowards who plod forward using torn-off car doors for shields, are thus more vulnerable when attacked from behind, and even manage to gently encourage rudimentary teamwork.

By all rights, mowing down such goons should at least be middling run-and-gun fun. You can spend in-game money earned by repeatedly chewing through cannon fodder and executing or arresting bosses to buy the likes of an assault rifle or grenade launcher between matches, or consumable items that can improve health regeneration, increase melee damage, and more. Better still, random challenges grant bonus cash for stuff like taking out particular targets before a timer expires, while filling a kill-streak meter unlocks abilities such as magical enemy-paralyzing chains and automatic turrets.

Yet *R.I.P.D.* trips over its own feet every step of the way. Inexplicably silent enemies get stuck in place, or become confused and run away because they can't figure out how to get to you. Similarly, dropped turrets frequently fail to function altogether. Meanwhile, texture pop-in and framerate hiccups plague every environment, and ammo scarcity means you'll constantly curse the need to stop in place and hit the D-pad any time you want to switch weapons.

Worst of all, you're given only the most minimal indication that a given attack did damage. One of the main joys of any shooter is inflicting grievous bodily harm on deserving foes; here you won't get so much as a splatter of blood or a pained grunt. A distinct lack of satisfaction is thus guaranteed. Do yourself a favor: leave *R.I.P.D.* in its grave.

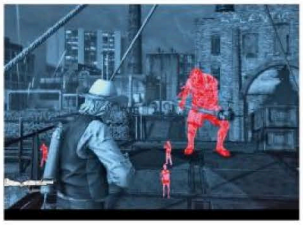
— CAMERON LEWIS

+ Decent enemy variety; random mid-match challenges; purchasable weapons and upgrades.
- Miserable lack of feedback leaves you wondering whether your attacks are doing any damage.
- Presentation issues; lame enemy pathfinding; weapon-switching woes; bugged special abilities.
? Only Deados toss grenades? Why?

XBOX OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE
VERDICT 4.0

Transparent ethereal chains keep a few enemies out of your face for a few seconds.

LEFT When you see a guy with a man-sized pipe charging your way, be ready to dodge! **RIGHT** Buy and equip Tea Shades from the shop to dim the world and highlight enemies.



None of these dudes are terribly smart, but they often attack in droves.

SCRAPBOOKING: As you rake in riches by killing swarms of Deados, you'll gradually unlock new goodies in the "Archives" menu, including photos of Jeff Bridges and Ryan Reynolds in costume.

Scourge: Outbreak

No doctor can cure this blight

PUB UFO Interactive Games **DEV** Tragnarion Studios **ESRB** Mature **MULTIPLAYER** 4 in cooperative play, 8 in competitive play (Xbox Live or System Link)
ACHIEVEMENTS Ordinary **COST** 800 Microsoft Points ($10)

WHEN THE EVIL Nogari Corporation finds a potent new energy source in a meteorite's innards, they use that "Ambrosia" to oppress the planet for profit. Luckily, the human race has a friend. Echo Squad's four grunts aren't exactly fans of big business, and each warrior wades into over-the-shoulder shooting galleries ensconced in a form-fitting suit designed to exploit the mysterious fuel.

You know the routine: you hustle into each room, slap yourself against walls of waist-high cover, and pop out now and then to pick off anyone dumb enough to point a gun in your general direction. Yet as familiar as these *Gears of War*–style mechanics are, *Scourge* immediately runs into trouble with the basics. Oftentimes you'll tap a button with the intention of taking cover, only to discover that your chosen chunk of scenery inexplicably fails to register as valid protection.

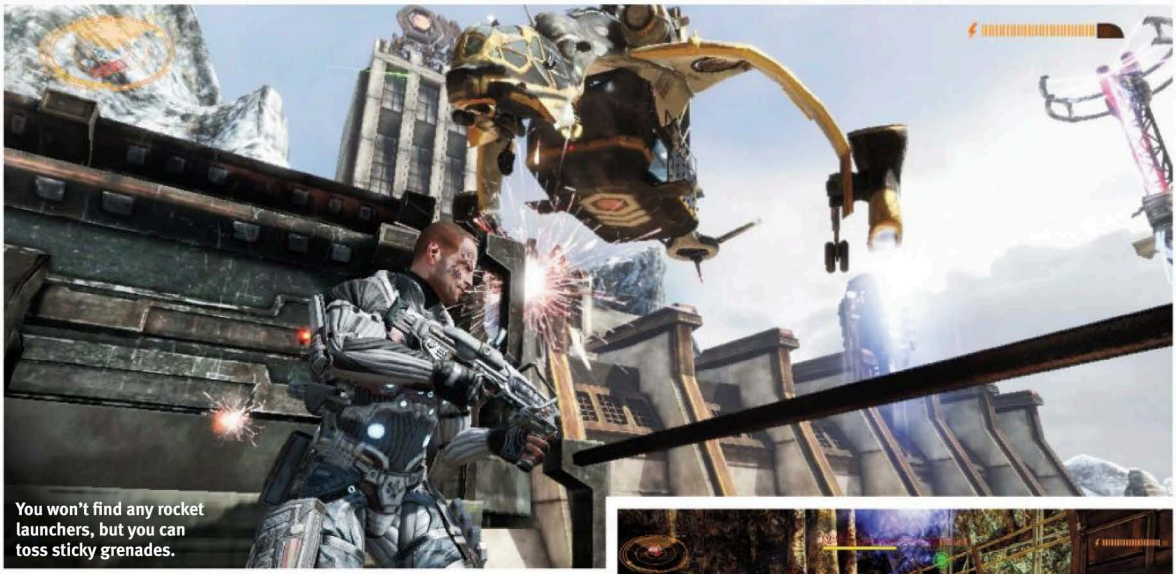
Worse, there's no way to leap smoothly between cover points, and woefully poor visual feedback on your current health means you'll spend a considerable amount of the five-hour campaign waiting for someone to rescue you. A "Quick Order System" lets you issue context-sensitive instructions to your squadmates (e.g., kill a particular foe, revive a fallen comrade, or hack a terminal), but the poor dopes sometimes get confused and stuck en route, and a single ally's death sends you back to the last poorly spaced checkpoint. If you can't cobble together a proper team with three human co-op partners, you'd do well to load up on aspirin.

Though endless streams of generic grunts do little to get the blood pumping, they're still far preferable to the absurdly durable walking tanks you'll grow to loathe as the campaign wears on. A single goon with a mask that only dozens of bullets can dislodge is one thing; rooms packed full of the jerks will test the patience of a saint. Why should you care one whit about tossing up short-lived energy shields, emitting weak shockwaves incapable of killing even common cannon fodder, or earning XP that unlocks terribly inadequate performance-enhancing perks? It's an unanswered mystery.

Predictably, you'll have a much better time blasting away in by-the-numbers deathmatch, team deathmatch, and capture-the-flag engagements — well, if you can find any other players in the ghost town that passes for *Scourge*'s multiplayer lobby. Given the game's crippling problems, it's hard to blame folks for staying away in droves. — **CAMERON LEWIS**

+ Decent competitive multiplayer; quick context-sensitive ordering system; only $10.
– Inconsistent cover scenery; poor health feedback; ineffectual A.I. teammates; pointless powers.
– Armored foes that can withstand a crazy number of bullets.
? How do such weak shockwaves penetrate solid objects?

XBOX OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE
VERDICT 3.5

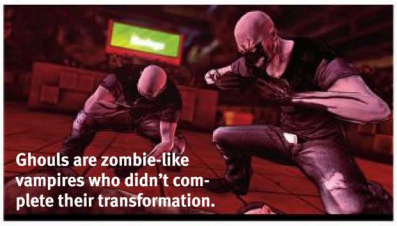


You won't find any rocket launchers, but you can toss sticky grenades.

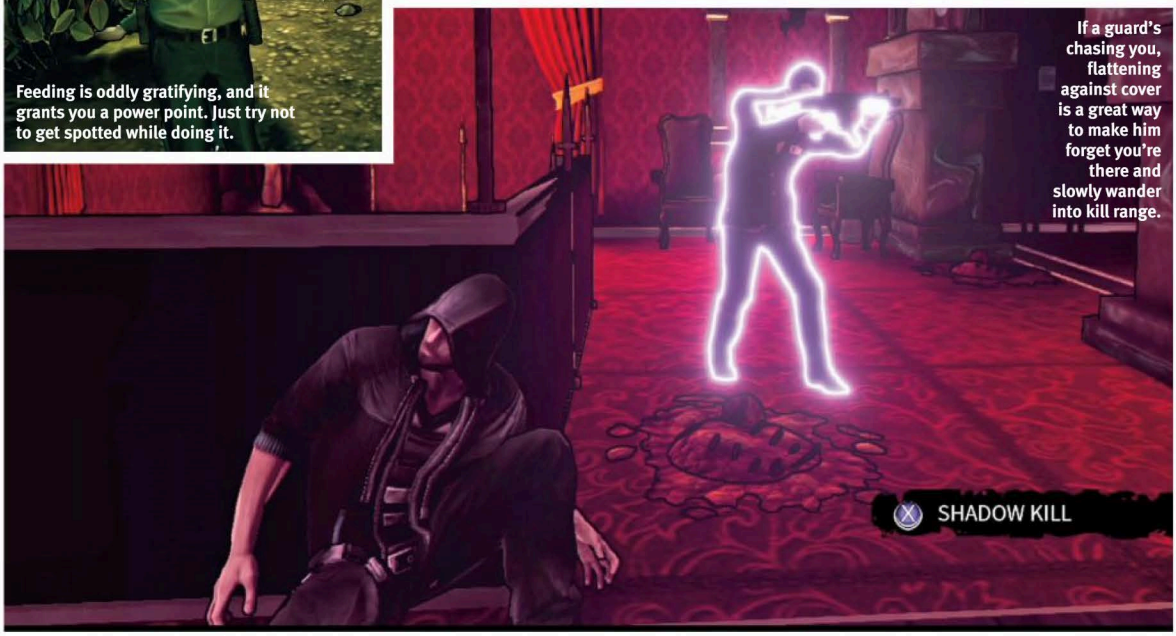
LEFT Some of the creeps you'll face look like something out of a John Carpenter movie. **RIGHT** Holding RB lets you tell a particular teammate to interact with whatever's currently under your reticule.

MEMORY DUMP: Though there's precious little distinguishing *Scourge*'s various playable characters, each one unlocks a handful of marginally enlightening flashback videos over the course of the campaign.

Feeding is oddly gratifying, and it grants you a power point. Just try not to get spotted while doing it.


Ghouls are zombie-like vampires who didn't complete their transformation.

Cartoonishly huge PDAs are collectibles. They contain emails that help fill in the plot slightly.



If a guard's chasing you, flattening against cover is a great way to make him forget you're there and slowly wander into kill range.

Dark

Vampires suck

PUB Kalypso Media **DEV** Realmforge Studios **ESRB** Mature **MULTIPLAYER** None **ACHIEVEMENTS** Generous **COST** $50

ON XBOX 360

WE WOULDN'T MIND seeing a boom in the largely unexplored "vampire stealth" genre — as long as it doesn't include more games like *Dark*. Centered on an amnesiac vampire (sigh) named Eric Bane (*sigh*), *Dark* sends you on a quest through a modern vampire underworld to confront and destroy the city's most powerful bloodsuckers. This mainly involves sneaking around and stealth-killing (mostly) human guards before they can spot and swarm you.

Whereas games like *Hitman: Absolution* and *Dishonored* use stealth to create flexible experiences that encourage quick thinking and improvisation, *Dark* plays it strictly old-school. While the action unfolds in a series of semi-open areas patrolled by enemies, success usually boils down to trial-and-error experimentation (where "error" often means a quick death and a long load screen) to figure out what order you need to kill the guards in to keep from being noticed. If you're discovered, you'd better find a new hiding place quick: even though he's a vampire, Eric's vulnerable to bullets, and his sluggish punch attack and limited-use powers won't do much against more than a couple of guards at a time.

There's a little more to it than that: over the course of the game, Eric can unlock and upgrade vampiric abilities that let him do things like see foes through walls, stun or kill them from a distance, or teleport straight to them for a quick kill. Most of these abilities require a point of "Vitae" to work, which must be earned one at a time by feeding on a live enemy — a longer takedown that carries a high risk of discovery.

No powers, however, can mask how routine and dull the action is, nor do they distract from the fact that guards either seem psychically attuned to your location or are stupid enough to think you've disappeared if you duck behind cover or hide in a bush. It's also hard to forgive how stingy *Dark* is with its checkpoints — and considering some areas can take 15 to 20 minutes to work through, that leads to a lot of extraordinarily frustrating repetition, especially early on.

The game does have a few bright spots. Its cel-shaded art style is fun to look at, and the level designs — which include a museum with a huge medieval-castle exhibit, plus an artificial forest inside a skyscraper — are unique and memorable. But that's not enough to recommend what's otherwise a stiff, banal mess of wasted potential. **— MIKEL REPARAZ**

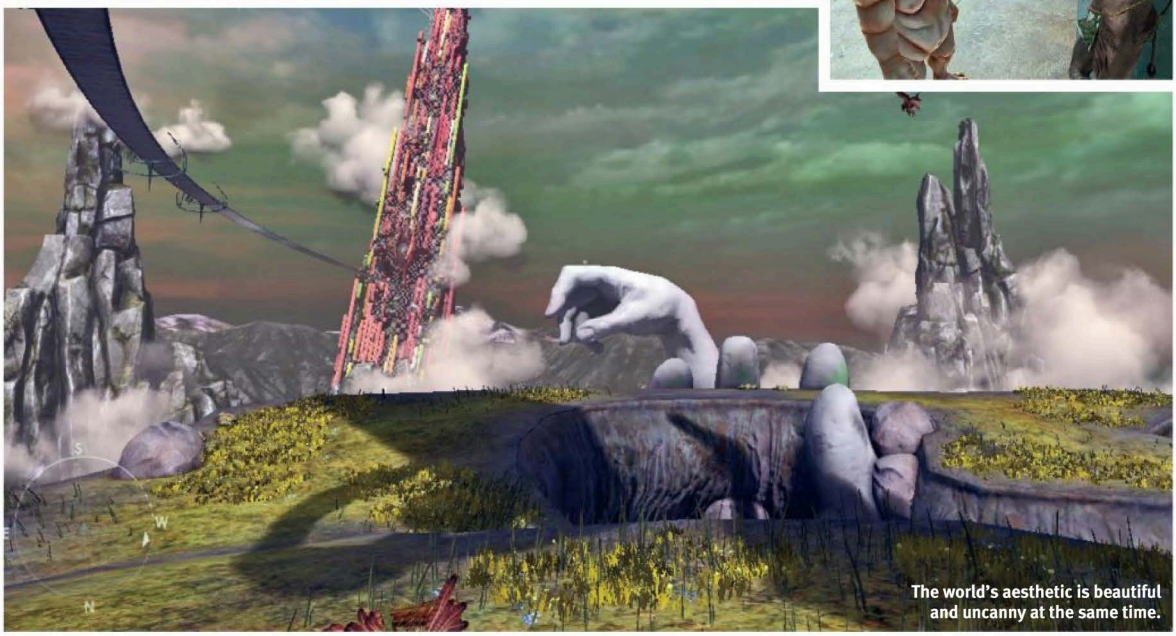
+ Cool art style and memorable level design; powers can be fun to unlock and play with.
- Bare-bones stealth action feels rote and confining; enemy A.I. is terrible in strange ways.
- Laughably bad story and script; same annoying song loops endlessly at Eric's nightclub HQ.
? Do folks today know what a PDA is?

XBOX OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE
VERDICT 4.5

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE: Eric Bane is voiced by Doug Cockle, better known to *Witcher* fans as Geralt of Rivia — and his delivery is jarringly identical here.

LEFT Co-op allows for an extra set of hands in combat, but adds little else to the experience. **RIGHT** Stringing together a large enough combo can stun enemies, opening them up for a powerful finishing blow.

The design of Zenozoik's inhabitants ranges from creative to downright creepy.



The world's aesthetic is beautiful and uncanny at the same time.

Zeno Clash II

To explore strange new worlds, to seek out new life...and then piledrive them

PUB Atlus **DEV** ACE Team **ESRB** Teen **MULTIPLAYER** 2 cooperatively (local or Xbox Live) **ACHIEVEMENTS** Easy **COST** 1,200 Microsoft Points ($15)

PITTING YOU AGAINST absurd creatures in an alien wilderness thanks to a hermaphroditic bird-man called Father-Mother, *Zeno Clash* (*OXM* rating: 6.0) turned a few heads back in 2010. In *Zeno Clash II*, the weirdness and first-person fisticuffs return with a larger scope and improved combat, but this sequel also caters heavily to fans of the first game.

Once again you play as Ghat, joined this time by his sister Rimat (who a friend can control if you play the campaign cooperatively); here they're at odds not with each other, but with a technologically advanced creature forcing civilization onto the uncultured land. The plot goes to some interesting places but relies too much on the first game's story and will leave newcomers scratching their heads. The voice acting also ranges from incomprehensible to just plain grating, which hurts the experience.

Thankfully, a harsh, prehistoric-styled world full of belligerent biological oddities (including bird-lizards, masked crab people, and two-headed apes) is all the context you need to sink your teeth into the combat. The triggers on the controller correspond to each fist — allowing for strings of one-two punches, jabs, and uppercuts that flow well — and fighting rewards your throwing blows deliberately (and carefully: aiming for the head does more damage than thrashing at a foe's body) rather than mashing attacks mindlessly.

In addition to the new controls, Ghat and Rimat can use a special meter for hard-hitting special attacks, such as a sprinting shoulder check, and they employ a small number of gadgets. Each contraption has it uses, particularly a device that links two targets together so that damage taken by one is felt by the other, but outside of combat they solve only one kind of puzzle, which feels like a missed opportunity.

The campaign clocks in at around six hours, but the game does hold a few side distractions, including locating colored moths for an armless painter with a palette imbedded in his lower lip, hunting fuzzy purple marauders in the desert, and searching the semi-open world for skull totems that increase stats such as stamina, health, or the strength of the allies you can recruit.

Zeno Clash II is a good value for its $15 price tag, with engaging combat and a bizarre aesthetic that's certainly worth gawking at. The confusing narrative, poor voice acting, and lackluster puzzles make the game hard to love, but if "weird" is your niche, this trip offers some solid entertainment. — **PARKER WILHELM**

- \+ Fun and focused melee combat; new moves, gadgets add variety.
- \+ The unique flora and fauna of Zenozoik are incredibly imaginative and surreal.
- \- Irksome voice acting; plot shuts out newcomers; gadgets could've been so much more.
- ? How does a beast with a palette in his mouth enunciate so well?

XBOX OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE **VERDICT 6.5**

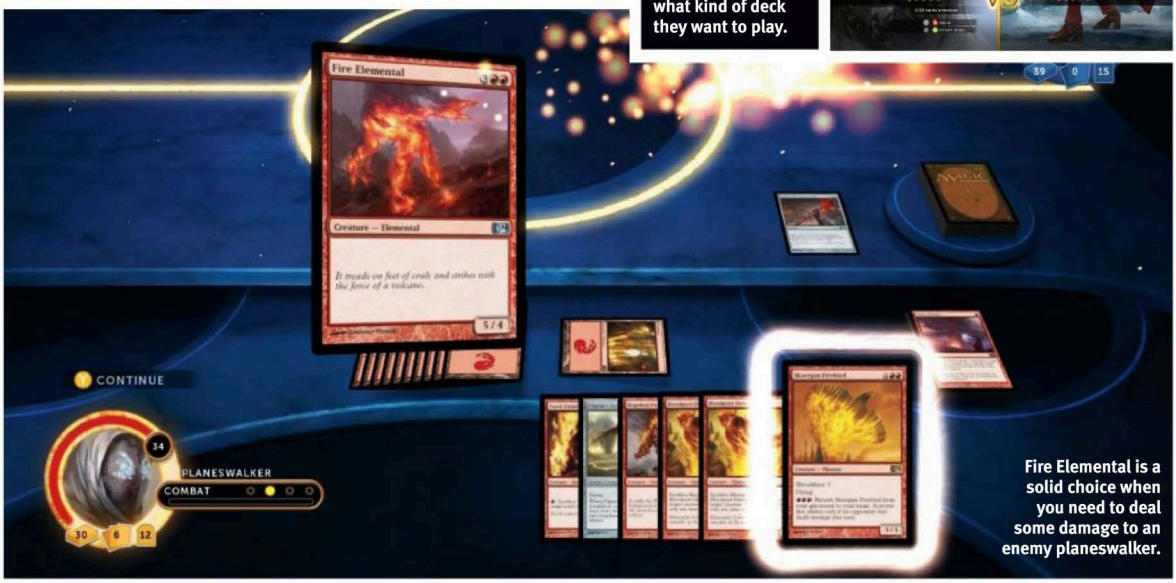
KNOWN FOR: *Zeno Clash II* was created by ACE Team, a small developer based in Santiago, Chile. They also made *Rock of Ages*, an XBLA-based mixture of *Beautiful Katamari* and European history.

Microsoft
IT'S YOU
VS. THE WORLD.
Kinect Sports Rivals, built for the power of Xbox One, captures your likeness as a champion and plunges you into a world of sports competition. Take on your friends, your rivals, and the entire world.
RATING PENDING
RP
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Visit www.esrb.org for rating information
Microsoft Studios
Rare
KINECT SPORTS
RIVALS
Xbox.com/KinectSportsRivals

XBOX ONE

Each chapter contains four fights — a mix of Encounters and regular matches.

LEFT Mythical Rare cards like this Shadowborn Demon tend to be supremely powerful. **RIGHT** Deck stats are handy for players who aren't sure what kind of deck they want to play.



Fire Elemental is a solid choice when you need to deal some damage to an enemy planeswalker.

Magic 2014: Duels of the Planeswalkers

Not just for scrubs

PUB Wizards of the Coast **DEV** Stainless Games **ESRB** Everyone **MULTIPLAYER** 4 on Xbox Live **ACHIEVEMENTS** Easily collectible **COST** 800 Microsoft Points ($10)

XBOX LIVE ARCADE

DUELS OF THE PLANESWALKERS has always been a great way to learn how to play *Magic: The Gathering*, but its focus on making the complex real-world collectible card game accessible to newcomers could sometimes push more experienced players into Yawnsville. *Magic 2014* sets out to give advanced planeswalkers just as much to do as their novice counterparts.

The biggest addition to *Magic 2014* is the new Sealed Play mode, in which players receive six randomized booster packs to open and build a deck from. It's the first time a *Duels* game has allowed us to build our own decks, and by implementing color, card cost, and other filters, the developers have made it incredibly easy to do so. Moreover, taking the newly built decks online to play against other folks adds a whole new level of competitive play. After the first two sets of packs, *Magic 2014* starts charging two bucks for each subsequent deck; but in comparison to the $18 or so you'd pay for the same number of real-world cards, the digital draft can be seen as a bargain.

For high-level players craving more of a single-player experience, the Challenges are still around. The 10 new puzzles are difficult enough to keep even the most perceptive players scratching their chins as they seek the one way to win the game. Meanwhile, the tutorial remains the best way to learn the game short of a knowledgeable buddy sitting across the table, showing you the basics. The step-by-step guide starts at the absolute beginning, teaching players the difference between instants and sorceries, creatures and lands. From there, it leads through basic strategies and prepares students for the real thing. It's all extremely well-paced and thorough, giving newbies all they need to know.

Once they're ready, the Campaign is a great place to go. Featuring a slew of new decks, it starts with Encounters (introduced in *Magic 2013*) — in which your A.I. opponent plays his deck in the exact same way every time — and then leads up to full-blown matches. Once the challenging campaign is over, you should be more than ready to hop online to test your mettle against other players.

Whatever mode you choose, though, you'll enjoy yourself. *Magic 2014* manages to retain what made the previous games great, while more than justifying the series' yearly releases.

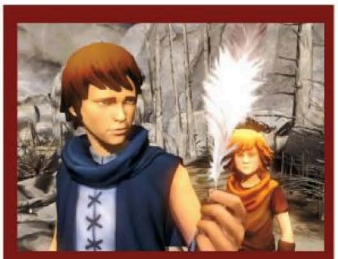
— TAYLOR COCKE

- **+ The tutorial is still as great as ever for newcomers learning *Magic*'s basics.**
- **+ The new Sealed Play allows full deck building...**
- **– ...though after the first two, it'll cost you.**
- **? When will we get access to all the cards in *Magic*?**

XBOX OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE

VERDICT 8.5

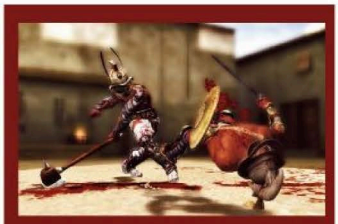
UMMM: A random Google search accidentally took us to the website for a different kind of Magic card: a Magic Johnson–branded prepaid MasterCard. It says "MAGIC" on the front in bright yellow letters.



Brothers

We've come to expect great things from Starbreeze (*The Darkness*, *Chronicles of Riddick*), but *Brothers: A Tale of Two Sons* marks a stunning departure for the studio. A three-hour, story-based game with no dialogue, it has you controlling two boys simultaneously — one with each analog stick — as they roam a fanciful world in search of a cure for their sick father. Lovely locales, clever puzzles, and some touching character moments make this unique XBLA adventure one you'll remember.

VERDICT **8.0**



Spartacus Legends

Based on Starz's beloved TV series, *Spartacus Legends* offers free-to-play gladiatorial combat with a focus on violence and machismo. Though it's never as gory or over-the-top as the show, its 2D bouts do yield some sword-swinging, dagger-slicing fun; you can even be a fists-only fighter who pounds foes with his gauntlets. Dozens of single-player duels let you earn the in-game coin needed to buy better weapons and armor — a must in one-on-one slugfests over Xbox Live — but unless you spend MS Points to speed up the upgrading process, expect lots of grinding before you can afford the great gear needed for long-term victory.

The Back Button

What if the Best Is Lost?

LATELY I'VE BEEN imagining being in the year 2050 or something, showing off my super "retro" Xbox 360 to my next of kin. And I'm concerned that the games I loved in my youth will be incomplete products, should anything happen to the structure of the internet or Xbox Live in that time. I'd love to pass on the *Mass Effect* trilogy, but will my grandkids be able to enjoy download-only characters like Zaeed, Kasumi, and Javik? Will I be able to prove how huge *Batman: Arkham City* was when the Catwoman segments are locked out? Will my descendants ever see how fun *Fallout: New Vegas* is if the buggy disc they inherit never gets patched?

Don't get me wrong: I love digital distribution. Games on Demand and Xbox Live Arcade have given me a massive array of titles, all in one place, that I can play at a moment's notice, and DLC allows publishers to try bold new things they could never get away with at retail (I'm looking at you, *Far Cry 3: Blood Dragon*). The future of gaming is digital, and that's a good thing...for the most part. My worry is that the price we could pay is the inability to share these games with our friends and family (if you want to think short-term), or even with the next generation of gamers (if you want to think way out there).

I know technology has found a way to keep old games in the hands of new players via emulation and HD ports, but just in case Microsoft's servers don't survive the Second Martian Rebellion of 2038, I will continue holding out on games like *Borderlands 2*, *Saints Row IV*, and *Injustice: Gods Among Us* until their eventual Game of the Year editions come out. Gaming is a hobby I not only love to do in my spare time, but also love to share with others. Even if it's something as miniscule as the downloadable Freddy Krueger fighter in *Mortal Kombat*, I don't want that to get lost in time.

— PARKER WILHELM

WHAT'S THE SCORE?

GAME	ISSUE REVIEWED	PLATFORM	SCORE
Borderlands 2: Tiny Tina's DLC	Sept. 2013	Xbox 360	9.0
Capsized	Feb. 2012	XBLA	6.5
Crysis 3: The Lost Island	Sept. 2013	Xbox 360	6.5
D&D: Chronicles of Mystara	Sept. 2013	XBLA	7.5
Deadpool	Sept. 2013	Xbox 360	8.0 ▲
Fireburst	Sept. 2013	XBLA	1.5
Metro: Last Light	Sept. 2013	Xbox 360	8.5
Thunder Wolves	Sept. 2013	XBLA	5.0

YIKES: Seconds after beating us in an online match of *Spartacus Legends*, our first two opponents — perhaps getting a bit *too* into the spirit of the show — each messaged our Gamertag, taunting us for our loss.

The man behind *Resident Evil* on how he's returning to horror

For a man who scares people for a living, Shinji Mikami doesn't talk much. Given the loquaciousness of Western devs, he makes the term "reserved" seem almost too wordy in comparison – but his resume speaks for itself. After creating the original *Resident Evil* and with it the genre of survival horror, he oversaw some of Capcom's most cherished releases, including quirky actioners *Viewtiful Joe* and *Killer 7*. After a dalliance with PlatinumGames for *Vanquish*, he's back in the horror game with the upcoming *Evil Within* for Xbox One. BY JON HICKS

Evil Reborn

OXM: How has the horror-game landscape changed since your last horror game? Are you still taking the same approach as you did in the past?
SHINJI MIKAMI: The first one has a good balance as a horror game, but as they've done sequels, they've become more and more action-oriented. So now I want to go back to the original concept of survival-horror, and make it really scary.

Since *The Evil Within* is a new franchise, no one knows the universe, right? So, it's the first time for people to experience this universe, [and thus] it's easier for us to make things more scary. If it's a sequel, people understand the universe and less things are new to them.

OXM: Are you purposefully not going after the *Call of Duty* market, then?
SM: Yes, exactly.

OXM: Are you using the same tactics, or are there now different tricks you can use to mess with people's heads?
SM: The core thing of making things scary is the atmosphere; what the player would feel. I add scary creatures, or a scary situation and scary tricks, but the center is the atmosphere.

OXM: The new Kinect sensor can detect facial expressions and heartbeats. Is that something you think you can use?
SM: If the Kinect sensor is accurate enough to capture people's facial expression, then we could be able to utilize it. That's something I'd maybe like to use at some point.

OXM: Are you going to be using the Xbox One's new triggers in any way?
SM: I don't have a specific idea for that, but I should be able to utilize it. Fingers are very, very sensitive, so it's a good feature.

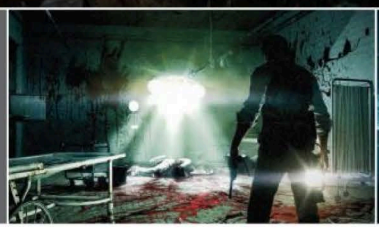
OXM: How important is it to start the game in the real world?
SM: Very important. It's one of the attractive things in the game that you don't really understand whether it's real or not. It's like that movie, *The Ring*, with the surface and the black side. You don't know if you're in the real world or not. I wouldn't want to say.

OXM: How do you use resources in the game?
SM: We have, [for example] traditional firearms in the game, but nothing fancy, because it's traditional. And our moves are quite limited. As an accent, we have traps that you can place, or, [on the flip side], when you see traps, you [can] disarm them.

DIFFERENT TAKE: The Japanese title for *Evil Within* – *Psychobreak* – is surprisingly more descriptive and points to the potentially psychological nature of some of the game's shifting realities.

Do these ghouls exist in *Evil Within*'s "real world"? Only Mikami knows right now, and he's not saying...yet.

LEFT Sebastian Castellanos is a detective — and our game's hero. **RIGHT** What a lovely paint job. **FAR RIGHT** A peek at *Evil*'s spooky prologue.



OXM: How do you use the traps? Are they just for those siege moments?
SM: You can use those traps pretty much any time. So it's a play option. You either use the firearm to play the game or you use traps to beat creatures. Or you can just sneak around to avoid creatures, [and be] more tactical and strategic. You can sneak through most of the game. You sneak, set a trap, and hide.

OXM: Do you ever let the player feel safe?
SM: We have areas that are really dangerous, where you feel danger, and there are areas where you don't feel that as much so you can relax.

OXM: Do the other characters we've seen show up later?
SM: Yes, but you have to be alone to be scared. So most of the time you're alone, but those characters just come and go. When you're by yourself, that's the situation [when] you become afraid, right? But on the other hand, to develop a story, you need other characters.

OXM: *The Evil Within* doesn't look particularly next-gen. Is that intentional?
SM: Yes. In horror you have to be not so flashy. But then, the player may get kind of tired of that, so towards the end of the game, we will have some flashy scenes as well.

OXM: What's the secret to creating scary characters?
SM: You have to love scary stuff. And watch a lot of movies.

OXM: What elements does the protagonist need to have?
SM: He has to be realistic, and he's able to fight against something. But, he's not strong.

OXM: Do you think it's possible to do an open-world horror game or is it essential to guide the player's path?
SM: It's possible, but it's a very difficult kind of approach from a technical perspective and from a creative perspective. And also Tango Gameworks is a new studio, so we didn't take that approach this time. I want to do it some day.

OXM: *Resident Evil 4* [a game Mikami directed at Capcom] is still the high water mark for survival horror. What's it like having to compete with yourself?
SM: The important thing that we're trying to achieve with *The Evil Within*, is the fear. How scary the game is. In that sense I think I can actually beat my past games, but I don't think I could beat every aspect of them.

OXM: Any things you've learned from your recent games that you can bring to *Evil Within*?
SM: Teamwork.

OXM: We've seen titles like *Dark Souls* using online connectivity to enable other players to influence your game world. Is that something that you've considered doing in this game?
SM: Yeah, maybe in DLC. I guess we can't really get into details.

OXM: Do you think you'll be able to reach entirely new gamers with this, or just existing horror fans?
SM: It's possible, but to achieve that, the game has to be really, really frightening.

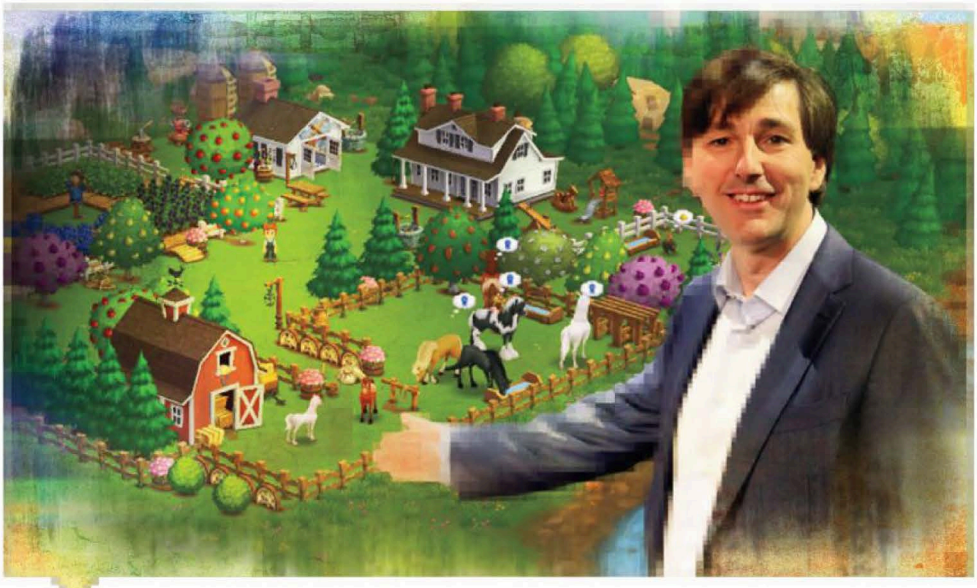
Resident Roots

Before *Resident Evil,* Capcom produced a 16-bit, top-down Super Famicom horror title called *Sweet Home* (1989), which is credited as the forerunner of the survival-horror series. With its haunted-mansion premise, multiple character storyline, and various endings, Mikami was tasked with remaking it for Sony's PlayStation. What resulted was the first *Resident Evil* in 1996.

CHANGED: *Resident Evil*'s Japanese title was not used for Europe and North America due to predicted difficulty in trademarking "*Bio Hazard*," according to a GamesRadar interview with former Capcom comms director Chris Kramer.

Inbox

The latest Xbox news, marinated in snark, then grilled to a crisp



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Gamertag: [Editor's first name] OXM

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LEAVING life as president of Microsoft's Interactive Entertainment to become CEO of social gaming company Zynga is Don Mattrick. In the wake of his departure, Microsoft announced a huge restructuring plan, which includes installing Julie Larson-Green as head of the Xbox hardware group. At the same time of the shakeup, Bloomberg reported that back in 2010, Mattrick wanted to buy Zynga, which would have sent popular social games like *Farmville* straight to Xbox Live. The deal ultimately fell apart, which, in the end, may have been Mattrick's greatest gift to the 360.

▼ **REVEALING** some history behind the name "Xbox" is one of the original console's creators, Seamus Blackley. In an interview with *Edge Magazine*, Blackley shares a long list of names batted around before the team finally settled on "Xbox," which included MARZ (Microsoft Active Reality Zone), FACE (Full Action Center), AMP (Active Microsoft Player), and R&R (Reality and Revolution). After this insight, Xbox One doesn't sound that bad after all.

HELPING small businesses will be Xbox One, according to a blog post from Microsoft Xbox MVP Marques Lyons on Microsoft.com. Lyons describes Xbox One as "entirely justifiable" as a business expense, and details the many ways the console will help businesses run more efficiently, using examples like Skype conferencing and SkyDrive. The post instantly became one of the most forwarded links to bosses everywhere.

▼ **DEPARTING** as the president of id Software is Todd Hollenshead. id has struggled to find an audience in recent years, most recently releasing 2011's *Rage* and 2012's *Doom 3 BFG Edition*. The reason for Hollenshead's departure was unclear, but Bethesda's Pete Hines told *IGN* the prezzie's leave was "to pursue other personal interests." What are the chances that Hollenshead's actually strapped to a table somewhere, being electro-shocked into overseeing development on *Prey 2*?

We may be kidding about the electro-shock, but we aren't kidding about wanting *Prey 2*.

IN OTHER NEWS: Microsoft quietly removed the fees required for Title Updates back in April, but it wasn't until early July that most folks caught wind of the good news via a story on website *Eurogamer*.

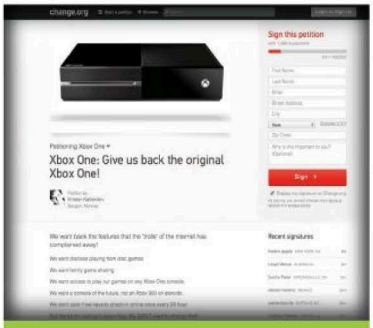
Ghosts' canine squadmate approves of "Hirshberg" as a verb. What a good boy!

BEAMING with pride is Activision publishing CEO Eric Hirshberg, who told *IGN* that the *Call of Duty* franchise "has never been stronger." As evidence, Hirshberg pointed to the number of players logging on to *CoD* as at an all-time high, as well as the amount of DLC and season passes being sold. So yeah, you read that right, *Call of Duty: Ghosts* skeptics, *CoD* is back on top (where it's been for the past four years)! You just got Hirshberg'd!

BREAKING an 11-year silence to the media was Bungie co-founder Jason Jones in an interview with *IGN*. Jones didn't elaborate a lot on his media shyness during all these years, but did take credit for the freakish power of the pistol in the first *Halo*, and claimed a Gamerscore around 13,000. He also briefly touched on a *Minecraft*-like game Bungie had been developing around the same time as *Halo: CE* that never saw the light of day...which *needs* an XBLA release date, stat.

After 11 years out of the spotlight, we wouldn't blame you if you thought this is what Jason Jones looked like.

PETITIONING Microsoft to reverse its reversal of controversial DRM policies for Xbox One is a group of fans online. In June, Microsoft stunned everyone by dropping many of Xbox One's contentious features, like 24-hour online check-ins. As of writing this, around 11,000 people have signed the petition, definitively proving there is absolutely no pleasing the Internet whatsoever.



Hold on to the feelin', you crazy internet kids.

RAISING more ire from gamers is Microsoft, which told various media outlets that Xbox One won't ship with a headset (because you'll be using Kinect 2.0 to talk to your friends, natch). In fact, Microsoft told *Game Informer*, "Only Xbox One controllers and accessories will work with the new console." So those dudes with $700 limited edition *Street Fighter* 235-button fightsticks for the 360? Out in the cold.

DISAPPEARING are Microsoft Points, which should be gone from Xbox Live by the time you read this, to be replaced by the local currency pricing on games, DLC, etc. The concept of rewarding players with points isn't totally disappearing, as Microsoft says it plans to introduce something "even better." That news, however, comes as little consolation to the workers currently being laid off from sites like *microsoftpointsconverter.com*.

Twitter Talk

INDUSTRY AND FAN MUSINGS

Aaron Greenberg

@aarongreenburg 11 JUL 13

- **Wanted to share I am staying/team & Xbox, will be Chief of Staff for Devices & Studios reporting now to Julie Larson-Green.**

Phil Fish

@PHIL_FISH 28 JUN 13

- **it's still so completely surreal to me that people "report" on what I say in that way. it's weird. it's really weird.**

Mike Drucker

@MikeDrucker 8 JUL 13

- **RIP Ryan Davis. His love of games only made other people love games more. And making fun more fun is the best thing to do in the world.**

Tom Warren

@tomwarren 1 JUL 13

- **God I hope I can play Farmville on Xbox One. Make it happen Don. Make it happen.**

Based loosely on stories of Assassin recruits bravely jumping to their deaths on command, the Leap of Faith quickly became *Assassin's Creed's* signature move.

Backtracking with Assassin's Creed

The not-so-humble beginnings of the alt-history juggernaut

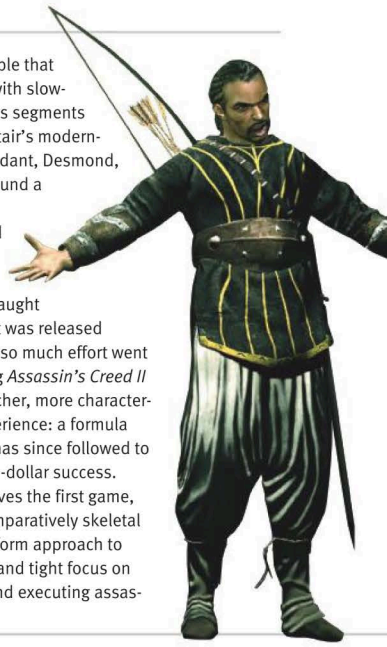
This fall, ***Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag*** will mark the sixth game in the series to appear on 360, and it promises to be the most popular yet (because *pirates*). As we prepare to embark on our upcoming trip to the Caribbean, we take a look back at where the series began...

REPETITIVE. FLIMSY. SHALLOW. These were just a few of the accusations leveled at the original *Assassin's Creed* when it was released — and they weren't entirely unfair. They may, however, have missed the point. *Assassin's Creed* was something no other game at the time had really attempted: a plausibly realistic re-creation of a time and place in history (specifically the Levant during the Third Crusade), where players were free to explore and kill as Altair, an acrobatic secret agent who met historical figures and climbed historical buildings.

The world was huge, consisting of three cities, a fortress town, and a vast expanse of countryside in between them. It was also richly detailed and filled with danger, and climbing to avoid detection or hiding in the game's sizable crowds were some of the more innovative ways to stay alive. That it cast players as one of the Assassins — an Islamic secret society typically portrayed as terrifying villains — only made it more intriguing.

It was an easy world to get swept up in, but its charms weren't for everyone. Ignoring them just left the story and missions to pursue — and here's where things got problematic. Played as a straight shot, *Assassin's Creed* was little more than nine brilliant but brief assassination missions padded out by tedious side tasks (like pickpocketing or interrogation) and needless trips across the same vast expanses of open space. Couple that busywork with slow-as-molasses segments in which Altair's modern-day descendant, Desmond, strolled around a lab reading emails, and it's easy to see why the game caught flak when it was released — and why so much effort went into making *Assassin's Creed II* a longer, richer, more character-driven experience: a formula the series has since followed to multibillion-dollar success.

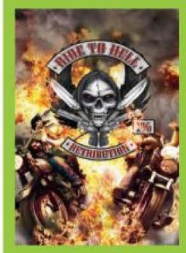
That leaves the first game, with its comparatively skeletal story, free-form approach to gameplay, and tight focus on planning and executing assas-



LEAVING THE NEST: *Assassin's Creed* began life as *Prince of Persia: Assassin*, wherein the goal was to rescue a relatively helpless prince from harm as the titular badass.

Even in broad daylight, it was possible to surprise targets with Altair's secret weapon, the Hidden Blade.

SKIP THIS! PLAY THIS!



The Lost and Damned

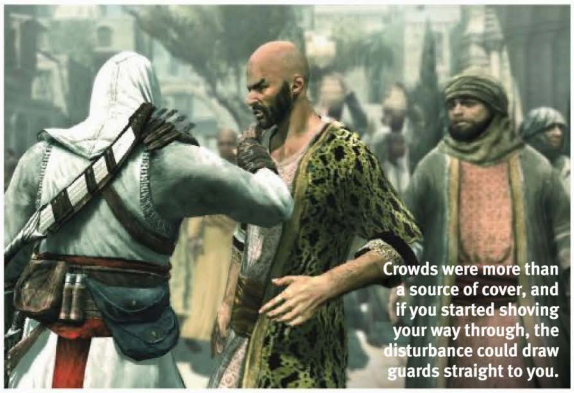
PUB: Rockstar North DEV: Rockstar Games RELEASED: 2009

SKIP! Ride to Hell: Retribution, a buggy, broken, joyless take on the world of biker gangs that we gave a 1.0 to in our review on pg. 76.

PLAY! The Lost and Damned, the biker-themed add-on for Rockstar's open-world epic, *Grand Theft Auto IV*.

WHY? If you're looking for some rough-and-tumble anarchy on two wheels, *The Lost and Damned* is everything that *Ride to Hell: Retribution* falls flat on its face trying to be. Seriously, watching Nicholas Cage in the ghastly *Ghost Rider* is a more pleasant motorcycle ride than *Retribution*. Meanwhile, *Lost* both expands and improves *GTA IV*, adding checkpoints, sturdier motorcycle controls, and a new cast of characters in the open world of Liberty City.

HOW? *The Lost and Damned* is available as a *GTA IV* add-on through Xbox Live Marketplace for 800 MSP ($10). Or you can buy *Grand Theft Auto: Episodes from Liberty City* as a standalone (which also includes *The Ballad of Gay Tony*) from most game retailers for around $15. **– PW**



Crowds were more than a source of cover, and if you started shoving your way through, the disturbance could draw guards straight to you.

Defying hack-and-slash expectations, *Creed's* combat relied heavily on counters and perfect timing.

7 YEARS AGO IN OXM

Issue 62, Oct 2006

THE COVER Can we call *Project 8* Tony Hawk's last successful trick? The "Nail-the Trick" system laid bare in our exclusive was probably the best addition to the franchise this gen before *Proving Ground* played it too safe, followed by the plastic board spinoffs sinking the franchise, only for *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater HD* to come full circle and play it too safe again.

THE FUTURE Two games rated in our reviews section set the groundwork for some of the Xbox's most popular franchises. First, we have *Dead Rising*, the sometimes-frustrating forebear of zombie slaughterfests that bleeds into the Xbox One's launch with *Dead Rising 3*. Then there's *Saints Row*, lambasted in '06 for being extremely derivative of *Grand Theft Auto*, but now set to launch an insane space-set adventure seven years later.

THE GENESIS Executive editor Paul Curthoys called out five classic games for Sega's most successful console to make returns via Xbox Live. *Technically*, only two returned on XBLA (*NBA Jam*, *Golden Axe*), but *NHL 94* will (sorta) return as a special mode in *NHL 14*. We'll split the difference on the sorely-missed *Road Rash 2* and the sorta-overrated *Skitchin'*.

sinations, as something of a unique experience within the series. And surprisingly — even after playing every other *Creed* — it holds up reasonably well, provided you understand what you're in for. A few repetitive side tasks, after all, are a small price to pay for the privilege of climbing Solomon's Temple and the massive, super-detailed Cathedral of the Holy Cross at Acre.

Coincidentally, the first *Assassin's Creed* is also the one viewed by creator Patrice Desilets as the "purest" in the series. "There's a bunch of stories that you can have, but it's all in your head," Desilets said in a 2012 interview with games magazine *Edge*, pointing out that the game's world contains a ton of opportunities for mayhem and adventure that have nothing to do with the story — and which a lot of players consequently missed. "In *Assassin's Creed II*, we created the adventures for you and you're following them. For me, the first one is an amazing toy. The second one is the real game with rules and missions and it's really precise. But personally I like the poetry of the first one. It's pure." **– MIKEL REPARAZ**

All Tune'd Up

A great soundtrack means everything

BY PARKER WILHELM

Audio can sometimes enhance a game as much as the graphics or gameplay. The titles below aren't in the rhythm-genre and they don't necessarily need music like *Guitar Hero* or *Dance Central* might, but without their respective soundtracks, playing through them wouldn't be anywhere close to the same experience without their accompanying tunes. So, grab some headphones and dig in.

Techno Kitten Adventure!

21 Street Games LLC, 240 MSP ($3)

Taking the basic gameplay of the classic *Helicopter* browser game to the next level, 21 Street Games' rainbow-colored feline fest is about guiding a variety of kitties through magical realms that are half-dreamscapes, half-hardcore rave. (WARNING: Avoid this game if you have a history of epilepsy.)

Death

Silver Dollar Games, 80 MSP ($1)

On the surface, *Death* is an incredibly simple game where you match button prompts as you cling on to life. However, the song that plays during the near-death experience is a somber tune that sets the stage for a very minimal, but ultimately interesting, experience.

Death Goat

Nocturnal Studio, 240 MSP ($3)

This brutal twin-stick shooter takes no prisoners. Featuring playable characters with names like "Death Witch" and "Death Granny," you'll take on legions of grotesque hellbeasts while bands, such as Between the Buried and Me and Konkeror, blast shredding metal to fuel your carnage.

The Blitz

Silver Dollar Games, 80 MSP ($1)

It may seem simple in the gameplay department — all you do is press A with perfect timing to level cities with your bomber plane. But *Blitz*'s challenge lies in testing your patience as you wait for the perfect moment to strike. Luckily, the classy jazz soundtrack keeps your ears occupied at all times.

OFF-TOPIC: For non-*Red Dead Redemption* multiplayer devotees, did you know the last unlockable mount in the game's multiplayer is a Zebra Donkey? It can't jump, but it's the second-fastest mount in *RDR*.

—GameFly Presents—

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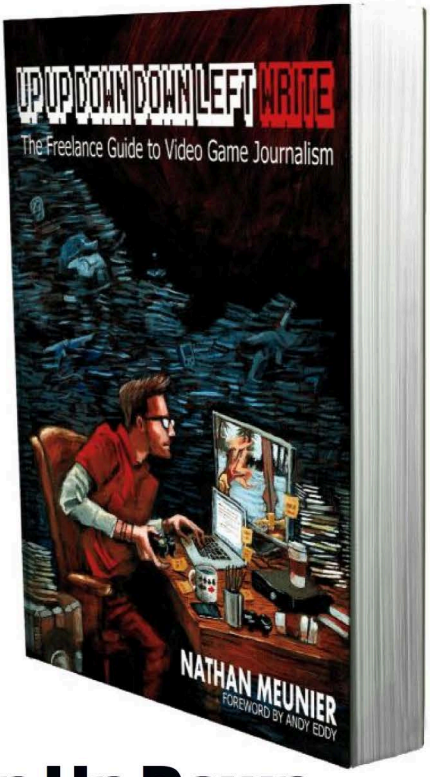

Up Up Down Down Left WRITE: The Freelance Guide to Video Game Journalism

AUTHOR Nathan Meunier **LENGTH** 230 pages
PUBLISHER Kung Fu Grip Press (self-published)
COST $15 (softcover), $9 (ebook)

FREELANCE WRITING FOR the videogame industry is not an easy gig to get, to say the least. A lot of people are vying for spots on the waiting list, and it can be tough to stand out from the crowd. But for those determined to break in and are trying to figure out where to start, Nathan Meunier's awkwardly-titled *Up Up Down Down Left WRITE: The Freelance Guide to Video Game Journalism* offers a solid top-level view of the industry and gives crucial insight into what it takes to be a freelancer — much like how former games journalist (now community manager at Activision) Dan Amrich covered gaming media in general in his less-awkwardly-titled *Critical Path: How to Review Videogames for a Living*.

Meunier's relatively brief tome covers a good selection of topics, from surviving tough income tax rates to dealing with public relations folks; it also doles out advice on crafting and delivering a good pitch, making the entirety essential reading. Even those with some experience under their belts could benefit from his advice on event etiquette — namely, leaving the gaming t-shirts at home and acting professional.

Though Meunier's reliance on *Star Wars* references and outdated memes can sometimes be tiresome — and his lack of anecdotes can make for some dry reading — as a comprehensive source for new freelancers, *Up Up Down Down Left Write* harbors very useful tips and advice. Because seriously, don't wear that gaming t-shirt. **– KAT BAILEY**

Air Force Gator 2: Scales of Justice

AUTHOR Dan Ryckert **LENGTH** 158 pages
PUBLISHER Up to Something Publishing (self-published)
COST $9 (softcover), $8.50 (ebook)

DAN RYCKERT'S *AIR FORCE GATOR 2: SCALES OF JUSTICE* is the literary equivalent of a Roger Corman production mixed with an episode of *WWE Smackdown* back when the show was rated TV-M...and that's a good thing. The *Game Informer* editor and Twitter savant (@danryckert) brings back anthropomorphic alligator-turned-American Hero Air Force Gator back for another round of terrorist-killing, with plenty of booze, sex, and violence along the way.

Missed the original? It almost doesn't matter; most of *Scales of Justice*'s humor is self-contained, with cheesy puns and disgusting descriptions of brutal fatalities wonderfully complementing the ultra-serious tone of the story of an alligator struggling with alcoholism while he attempts to avenge the death of his "totally hot" stripper girlfriend. Real-life figures make rare cameos, as they did in the original, but when they do, Ryckert keeps their personalities just within reason so you believe they'd act this way in a world where certain reptiles walk and talk thanks to genetic manipulation.

While extremely lean, that brevity works in *Scales of Justice*'s favor. Like the original, the story's a quick hit of humor and action for a bargain-basement $9 price, regardless of the format you choose. At that price, we recommend both books, but if you have to go with only one, the sequel has back-of-book praise for the Gator from the likes of baseball legend Jose Canseco and Kentucky Fried Chicken's Twitter account. How can you argue with that? **– DAVE RUDDEN**

HONORABLE MENTION: Faithful reader Mark Pogeler sent us a copy of his book *Project 642*, where a 10-year-old trained on games has to save his family from terrorists. It's a tad rough, but we liked it.

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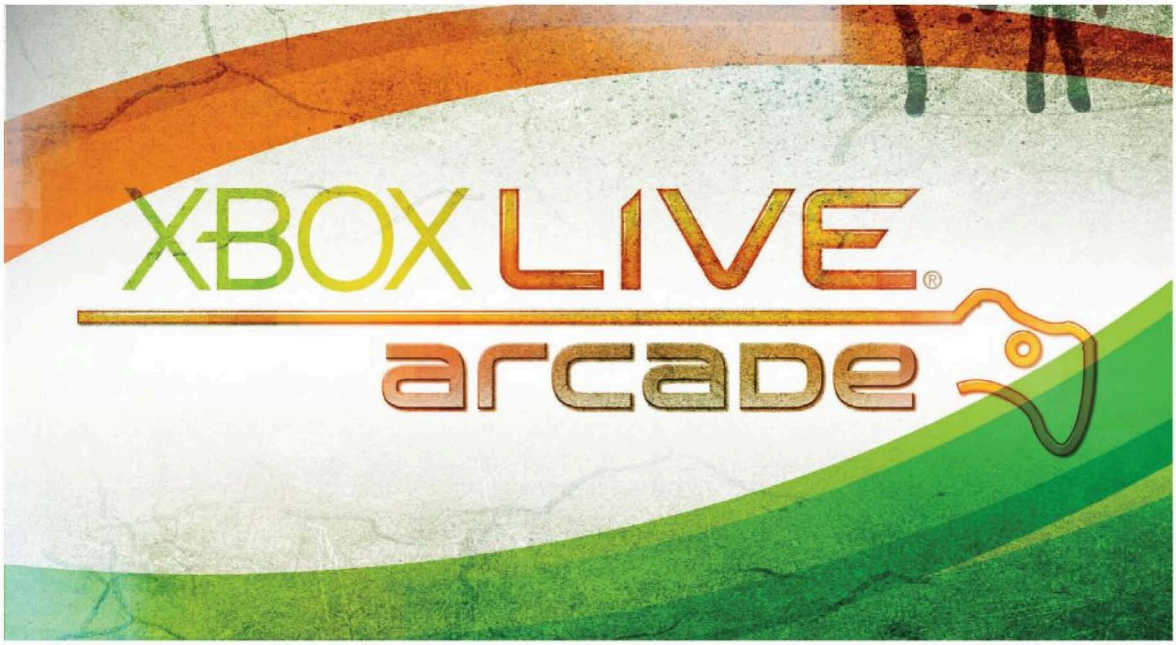

The Death of XBLA

The divide between Games on Demand and XBLA ends in Xbox One's marketplace. But is change always a good thing?

BRING THEM TOGETHER

Parker Wilhelm, Editorial Intern

The age of Xbox Live Arcade has been a huge boon for gamers like me with limited time and money. Being able to play games without going to the store, paying a quarter of the price, and not needing hours upon hours available to complete your typical $60 retail game has made gaming more accessible than ever.

That said, just like how we're quick to look down on $3 iOS games, there seems to be a second-class stigma put on games available through XBLA compared to their AAA peers. Of course a large, multi-million dollar game will have more coverage than a typical XBLA game, but these downloadable titles are off in their own section of the Xbox Live Marketplace, with new releases or promotional sales rarely getting much attention. It's much worse for Xbox Live Indie Games, (check out my Indieverse shout-outs on pg. 92!) which get little to no visibility at all on the console.

I think some of the 360's best games are Arcade games: *Castle Crashers* and Telltale's *The Walking Dead* are some of my all-time favorites, and while they aren't as big in scope as *Gears of War* or *Halo*, I feel they should all exist equally in the same marketplace. It creates better exposure for the smaller games, while also removing the binary segregation of $50-60 retail games from $5-15 Arcade games, allowing for more wiggle room for $25-30 mid-priced titles.

I completely believe that housing major releases with digital-only games allows for equal promotion and more flexible pricing. The Xbox One should be a destination for "gaming experiences," not arbitrary categories.

KEEP THEM APART

Dave Rudden, Senior Editor

Given the way Microsoft has programmed its dashboard over the last few years, it's obvious that a change is needed to better promote smaller games, as the number of angry ex-Xbox devs seem to be outpacing success stories like Undead Labs and The Behemoth. However, I'm not sure putting all games in the same silo is the solution.

For one thing, as much as we tout XBLA releases like *Spelunky*, *Fez*, and *Dust: An Elysian Tail*, the gaming public at large isn't as tuned in. Putting games like those alongside heavy-hitters like *Halo* and *Call of Duty* might be akin to putting a batch of fish (albeit beautiful ones) in a shark tank. If anything, the titles that currently qualify as "Xbox Live Arcade" should receive more promotion. With their lower price tags, they'll be the bastion of digital sales from the start — as opposed to big-budget games that'll likely sell for the same price in both brick-and-mortar and digital storefronts. Additionally, with plenty of marketing dollars raising public awareness of AAA titles, the smaller-scale digital-only releases will need that much better promotion on the Xbox One dashboard.

Like Parker notes, there's a middle-ground that can hopefully be reached where games can range between $15 and $50 — but the Xbox One launch likely won't be the time. We're still in a world where Activision's marketing muscle pushes *Call of Duty* to record-breaking sales yearly, while XBLA games that break 100,000 are considered hits. With the Xbox One encouraging online sales, Microsoft has a great opportunity to promote more unique titles to an even bigger audience. I only hope they'll take advantage of it.

TELL US: What do you think? Do you like keeping smaller titles separate from the bigger ones? Or do you even make the distinction when playing either? Send your opinions to us at *letters@officialxboxmagazine.com*.

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